From Abraham to Joshua

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ABRAHAM AND THE COVENANT

The Major Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

The majority of the Old Testament book of Genesis centers on the lives of the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Chapters 12-25 tell of the life of Abraham beginning with a brief recitation of the promises God made to Abraham. However, in the Book of Abraham found in the Pearl of Great Price, we learn of the early life of Abraham. Further, the most complete rendition of the promises made to Abraham is recorded in the Book of Abraham and will be included in this summary.

Abraham was born and raised in Ur of the Chaldees at a time when Egyptian influence, both political and religious, was felt over much of the ancient Near East (Abr. 1). We know little of his first contact with the gospel save that he became an ardent upholder of Jehovah which nearly cost him his life (Abr. 1:1-18). Having escaped the Egyptian priests who tried to kill him because he would not submit to Egyptian religious practices, Abraham fled his homeland and went to Haran, a neighboring area (Abr. 2:1-5).

While in Haran, the Lord introduced Abraham to the covenant of exaltation. This is recorded in Abraham 2:6-11. From these verses we can synthesize the promises given to Abraham, and later to Isaac and Jacob. The promises can be categorized into three general areas. Each category has promises that are to be fulfilled both in mortality and eternity. The following chart lists the categories of promises with both the mortal and eternal promises.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mortal Promises</th>
<th>Eternal Promises</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  Posterity</td>
<td>Abraham was promised a large posterity that would become a great nation.</td>
<td>Abraham was promised that he would have eternal increase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.  Land</td>
<td>Abraham was promised that his posterity would have a special land to live in</td>
<td>Abraham was promised that he would have an eternal promised land known as the celestial kingdom.</td>
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<td>(a promised land)-a land where his posterity is free to worship God the way He intends.</td>
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<td>3. Gospel/Priesthood</td>
<td>1. Abraham was promised that his posterity would have all the blessings of the gospel and priesthood.</td>
<td>Abraham was promised that he would have eternal life or exaltation in the celestial kingdom (which is the ultimate blessing of the gospel and priesthood).</td>
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<td>2. Abraham was promised that through his posterity all nations would be blessed with the opportunity to have the gospel.</td>
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This covenant is known both as the Abrahamic Covenant and the marriage covenant for time and all eternity for when a man and woman are married in the temple they receive all the blessings promised to Abraham. The key to receiving the eternal blessings is the mortal blessing. Note the following:

- **Posterity** Abraham and Sarah were promised that they would have posterity while in mortality. Their faithfulness in bearing and raising a righteous family would insure that they would have the blessing of eternal increase or posterity in the eternities.
- **Land** Abraham and Sarah were promised that their posterity would have a land. The importance of this can be seen in the fact that Abraham was raised in a land without religious freedom. Therefore, the promise of land would insure that Abraham’s posterity would have a land where
they could worship God they way God intended. Through proper worship of God, Abraham and his posterity would ultimately receive an eternal land of inheritance - the celestial kingdom!

- **Gospel** Abraham and Sarah were also promised that their posterity would have gospel or priesthood privileges. Further, they were promised that their posterity would become a blessing to all nations of the world by bringing them gospel opportunities. The eternal fulfillment of this promise is that if Abraham and his posterity and any who join the truth faith through Abraham’s posterity lived the gospel fully they would receive exaltation or eternal life.

Often, LDS scholars emphasize the promises of posterity and gospel. Nevertheless, the land is of major importance in understanding the history of Israel in the Old Testament. It is quite evident that for Abraham and his descendants, the land became the symbol of the Lord honoring the covenant he made with Abraham and, later, his descendants. If Abraham’s descendants kept the covenant, they would receive and maintain a prosperous life in the land. However, breaking the covenant would result in losing the land which was tantamount to losing prosperity, divine protection, and ultimately the Lord’s saving grace given man through the gospel (the atonement).

**The Abrahamic Covenant and the Atonement**

There is a principle associated with the Abrahamic covenant that is essential in understanding God’s dealings with His children. Because the Lord promised Abraham that his posterity would have gospel/priesthood rights, the Abrahamic covenant insures that if Abraham’s posterity ever strayed from the gospel covenant, the Lord would do all in His power to bring them back into the covenant. This is only possible if the law of justice, which would condemn Abraham’s posterity because of their disobedience, could be satisfied. Thus, the role of Jesus Christ, in part, was to satisfy the law of justice making it possible for Abraham’s posterity (and any gentile who unites himself with Abraham’s posterity by covenant) to return to God’s covenant and receive the same blessings promised to Abraham.

This concept is important in understanding the purpose of the Book of Mormon. Moroni stated that the Book of Mormon was written “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-- And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ” (Title Page, Book of Mormon).

Essentially all the standard works are a historical account of the Abrahamic covenant, including prophecies of its fulfillment.

**Abraham Enters into the Covenant**

The incident of Abraham 2:6-11 seems only to be preparatory to Abraham’s actually entering into the covenant.

The rest of Abraham’s story is recorded in Genesis 12-25. After leaving Haran, Abraham traveled a great distance until he arrived at the land of Canaan. After traveling some distance in the land, he stopped at Shechem (modern Nablus), a sacred area near the center of the land of Canaan. While there, the Lord declared to Abraham that the land of Canaan was the land promised to Abraham and his posterity. Abraham built an altar (Gen. 12:6-7) memorializing Jehovah. This incident established Shechem as the sacred center of the land of promise for future generations. (It will be shown that several important Biblical events have Shechem at their center.)

Sometime later, the Lord said to Abraham, “I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land [the land of Canaan] to inherit it.” In response, Abraham asked the Lord, “whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” (Gen. 15:7-8). In response, the Lord told Abraham to bring him a certain number of animals. Abraham secured the animals and then cut them in half, laying the severed halves together. Why? Abraham understood that the Lord intended to formalize the promises He had made with Abraham through a covenant ritual.

Covenant rituals in the ancient world generally involved cutting and blood. In some cases animals were cut in half. Then after reciting the terms of the covenant, the parties making the covenant would pass between the severed parts of the animal (thus identifying themselves with the animal) suggesting that if they did not keep their part of the covenant then what was done to the animal would be done to them: i.e., they would be killed. In fact, the proper way to say in Hebrew, “he made a covenant” is “he cut a covenant.” (For another Old Testament example, see Jeremiah 34:18-19.)

After the animals were cut in half, the Lord stated the terms of the covenant. Abraham’s posterity would become enslaved in another land for four generations (a generation was one hundred years). At the end of that period the Lord would bring them out of bondage and give them the land of Canaan. Then the Lord, represented by a smoking furnace and a burning lamp, passed between the severed animals (Gen. 15:13-18). Abraham then knew the land would be his.

In Genesis 15, only the Lord entered in the covenant. Genesis 17 records the occasion relative to Abraham’s entering into the covenant. The ritual which initiated the covenant on Abraham’s part also involved cutting and blood. The ordinance was that of circumcision. Circumcision became the token of the covenant throughout Old Testament history. The one entering into the covenant cut off his foreskin symbolizing that if he did not keep his part of the covenant that he and his posterity would be cut off from the presence of the Lord even as he had cut off the foreskin.

**The Abrahamic Covenant is “Made Sure”**

In Genesis 17:1, Abraham was told what his part of the covenant was in these terms: “walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1). To walk before the Lord is to be obedient to all that God requires. When one is obedient to all that God
commands, he then is assured by God that the blessings promised him for his obedience will be given to him (D&C 82:10; 130:20-21).

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the Lord will thoroughly prove those who come unto him and when he finds that they are “determined to serve Him at all hazards, then [they] will find [their] calling and [their] election made sure.”

Abraham was fully tested by the Lord and was found obedient in all things (D&C 132:37).

The testing of Abraham forms the basis of the Abraham story found in Genesis 12-22. In these chapters, it can be seen that the testing of Abraham followed a pattern: he was asked to give up something earthly for a higher or Godly cause. In the end, Abraham never really gave up anything for he was always blessed with something better. For example, he was asked by the Lord to give up his homeland and inheritance only to be given an eternal land and inheritance by the Lord (Gen. 12:1-3). Again, when strife arose between his herdsman and the herdsman of his nephew, Lot, Abraham gave Lot the best part of his land that there might be peace between them. Yet, God assured him that he had not really given up anything for in the end the whole of the land would be his and his posterity (Gen. 13:5-17). On another occasion, Sarah had given Abraham her handmaid, Hagar, to bear a child in her behalf. Then contention arose between Sarah and Hagar because Hagar attempted to assume a status that was not rightfully and legally hers (that of being a full wife to Abraham instead of a handmaid raising up a child for Sarah). Consequently, Sarah told Abraham to expel Hagar from the tribe because of Hagar’s unethical behavior (Gen. 16). In so doing, Abraham lost his son and heir. Yet, the Lord promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son of their own that would be the heir of Abraham (Gen. 17). That son was Isaac.

The ultimate test of Abraham’s obedience to God came when asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to him (Gen. 22:1-2). This struck against everything God had taught Abraham about the wickedness of human sacrifice. Moreover, offering Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham would lose his heir, the child through whom the promises of the Abrahamic covenant would come (Heb. 11:18-19). Nevertheless, Abraham was obedient to the command of God and would have sacrificed Isaac had the Lord not intervened and stopped Abraham at the very moment he was about to slay his son (Gen. 22:10-12). This test of Abraham’s obedience proved that Abraham was “determined to serve God at all hazards,” therefore the Lord assured Abraham that the covenant was now in full force (Gen. 22:15-18). This is confirmed in modern revelation (see D&C 132:29-37).

Abrahamic Covenant Extended to Isaac and Jacob

The covenant made with Abraham was also to be made with his son, Isaac. Since the covenant was made as part of the marriage covenant, it was essential that Isaac marry a worthy woman within the covenant. This was graphically emphasized when Abraham sent his servant to procure a wife for Isaac. To his servant, Abraham said: “Put forth I pray thee thy hand under my hand, and I will make thee swear before the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son, of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell; but thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred and take a wife unto my son Isaac” (JST Gen. 24:2). Of this, President Spencer W. Kimball said: “Marrying outside the faith has always been forbidden. For example, the Lord inspired Abraham to marry a near relative rather than a Gentile. In respect of his son’s bride, Abraham commissioned his servant to go on a long and uncomfortable journey to obtain a girl of Isaac’s own faith.”

Abraham’s servant was obedient. He found for Isaac a most wonderful woman, Rebekah (Gen. 24). Eventually, the promises given to Abraham were given to them (Gen. 26:1-5).

Like Sarah, Rebekah was barren. Therefore, Isaac “intreated the Lord for his wife” that she might conceive. Isaac’s pleading was heard and Rebekah conceived (Gen. 25:20-21). Her pregnancy was full of difficulty. The account says that the “children struggled (Heb. ratstatts, meaning to crush) together within her.” She was probably unaware that she was having twins. Trusting in the Lord, she turned to Him and asked why she was having such a hard pregnancy. The Lord responded: “Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:22-23). The prophecy given to Rebekah was clear. From these two children would come two nations that would continually strive against one another. Further, the firstborn would NOT receive the birthright but the second born would, therefore, “the elder shall serve the younger.” Finally, the two children were born. The firstborn was called Esau and the second was named Jacob.

The birthright was a special status given to the firstborn son. To the receiver, it meant the family line and name would continue through him. Further, he was also given a double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17). Among the patriarchs, the birthright appears to have carried an additional responsibility, that of priesthood responsibilities. Therefore, among the patriarchs, the birthright was given to the son who was most qualified. It appears that the father formalized the birthright through a special blessing wherein the son was acknowledged as the principal heir.

The Genesis account tells the story of Esau selling Jacob his birthright for a pottage and bread (Gen. 25:29-34). This story ends with this statement: “thus Esau despised (Heb. bazah, meaning to hold in contempt or find worthless) his birthright.” The story reveals Esau’s attitude towards the birthright while at the same time showing how bad Jacob wanted it. Eventually, Esau married two women out of the covenant, “which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah” (Gen. 26:34-35). This should have disqualified Esau as the birthright son.

For whatever reason, Isaac, was going to give the birthright to Jacob anyway. But Rebekah, who had received the
revelation from the Lord that Jacob would receive the birthright, had Jacob deceive his father into giving him the blessing (Gen. 27). When Isaac realized what had happened, he did not revoke the blessing but rather told Jacob not to “take a wife of the daughters of Canaan” but go to the land where his mother came from. There he would find a wife suitable for the position he had been given by blessing. He further said, “And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham” (Gen. 28:1-5).

As Jacob journeyed to the land of his mother, he came to a certain spot where he decided to rest for the night. While sleeping, “he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” Then the Lord made the same covenant with him as he did with Abraham and Isaac. When he arose in the morning, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:10-17). He named the place, Bethel, a contraction of Beth-Elohim, which means literally ‘the House of the Lord.’ He said of it: ‘...this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ (Gen. 28:17.)

“Jacob not only passed through the gate of heaven, but by living up to every covenant he also went all the way in. Of him and his forebears Abraham and Isaac, the Lord has said: ‘... because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods.’ (D&C 132:37.)

“Temples are to us all what Bethel was to Jacob.”

Eventually, Jacob made his way to the land of his mother’s birth. While there, he lived with Rebeckah’s brother, Laban. In time he married two of Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, and two of their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen. 29-30). To these four women eleven sons were born, the last being Joseph. After several years, Jacob, with his wives and children, returned to the land of Canaan. On the way, he left his family and spent the night alone. What happened that night is at best vague: Jacob had a mysterious encounter. What exactly took place between these two is unclear. But three things are sure: Jacob was given a new name, he was blessed, and he saw God face to face (Gen. 32:24-32). Recalling this experience to Joseph later in life, Jacob said that he had been redeemed from evil through the heavenly ministrant (Gen. 48:16).

After returning to the land of Canaan, the Lord instructed Jacob to take his family to Bethel, where the Lord first appeared to Jacob. Jacob complied. While there, the Lord appeared to Jacob and reconfirmed the name change and the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 35:1-15). He then journeyed to the southern part of the land of Canaan to live. While on the way, Rachel died while giving birth to a twelfth son, Benjamin (Gen. 35:16-20). After settling in the land, Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn through Leah, “went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine” (Gen. 35:22) thus disqualifying him for the birthright blessing (see 1 Chron. 5:1-2).

MOSES AND THE EXODUS

How the Twelve Tribes of Israel Came to Live in Egypt

In Genesis 37 and 39-50, the story of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, is recounted. In this story, Joseph, who was favored by Jacob and who was to be given the birthright in Reuben’s place, was despised by his older brothers. They sold Joseph as a slave to a band of Ishmaelites who in turn sold him to Potiphar, an Egyptian official. Through a process of events, Joseph rose from slavery to become second in command of all of Egypt. In that position, Joseph prepared Egypt for seven years of famine, a catastrophe he had prophesied would happen. When the famine came, Jacob and his sons were forced to come to Egypt for food. As a result of this, Joseph was once again reunited with his father and brothers. Pharaoh invited Jacob and his family to live in Egypt. Jacob was initially reluctant to go to Egypt, but the Lord insured him that it was essential in fulfilling the covenant: “I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation.” Then the Lord promised him that he would bring Israel back to the land of promise again (Gen. 46:1-4). When Jacob arrived in Egypt, Pharaoh gave the best part of the land, the land of Goshen (in the delta area of the Nile), to him and his sons.

Before he died, Joseph prophesied concerning the tribes of Israel. He prophesied that Israel would be brought into bondage but that the Lord would raise up a prophet to deliver them from their captors and bring “out of this land unto the
land which he swears to Abraham, and unto Isaac, and to Jacob” (JST Gen. 50:24, 29, 34-36). He then prophesied that Israel would be “scattered again.” However, he said that God would bring “them to a knowledge of their fathers in the latter days; and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord.” At that time, God will “restore them, who are of the house of Israel, in the last days” (JST Gen. 50:31-32).

**The Twelve Tribes are Brought into Bondage**

The Book of Exodus tells of Israel’s escape out of Egyptian bondage. While in Goshen, the twelve tribes of Israel made Egypt their permanent place of residence. During this time “the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7). Sometime after Joseph and the Pharaoh died, “there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:7). Fearing that the Israelites would become greater than the Egyptians, but wanting them to build their cities for them, this new Pharaoh brought the Israelites into bondage. They remained in this condition for many years.

During this period of time, the Israelites gradually began to believe in and worship the Egyptian gods. Like most peoples of the ancient Near East, the Egyptians were polytheistic; that is, they believed in many gods. To the Egyptians, these gods controlled all the elements that allow men to live. They believed that by performing various rituals the gods would look kindly upon them and control the elements in such a way that mankind could survive and be happy. These rituals often involved immoral acts performed during the ritual action in the presence of the idols of the various gods located in temples or sanctuaries. As the Israelites began to follow Egyptian religious practices, they lost the knowledge of the gospel, the religion of the god their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

However, the Lord was not going to allow this situation to continue. According to the promise that he had made with Abraham (that he would bless Abraham’s posterity with the gospel), the Lord now set his hand to restore Israel to the knowledge of the gospel. This required the work of a prophet.

**Moses, the First Gatherer of Israel**

Sometime around 1300 B.C., the man ordained of God to restore the gospel to Israel and free them from bondage was born. His name was Moses. Elder McConkie stated that, “Moses, the man of God, continued the work of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in standing as a father and friend and founder of the family of Israel.” Moses was born a Hebrew but raised an Egyptian in Pharaoh’s court. When he was forty, Moses killed an Egyptian who was “smiting an Hebrew” slave. When this was found out, Moses fled Egypt for his life. He went to the land of Midian in the Sinai wilderness (Ex. 2:11-15). While there he lived with Jethro, the priest of Midian and a descendent of Abraham through Keturah, Abraham’s third wife (Gen. 25:1-4). Jethro gave to Moses one of his daughters to marry (Ex. 2:21). He also conferred upon Moses the Melchizedek priesthood (D&C 84:6).

While Moses was in the Sinai, “the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Ex. 2:23-24). According to the terms of the covenant, Abraham’s descendants would be given a land where they could worship God and live his gospel. To this end, the Lord called Moses to redeem Israel from bondage.

The calling of Moses came forty years after Moses fled Egypt. While tending his flocks near Mt. Sinai (sometimes called Mt. Horeb) the Lord called to Moses from a bush that appeared to be on fire but “was not consumed” (Ex. 3:1-2). As Moses approached this “great sight,” the Lord said, “Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). This was not an ordinary mountain but the “mountain of God” or the Lord’s holy temple (Ex. 1:1). The Lord introduced himself to Moses, saying, “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6), thus recalling the Abrahamic covenant. He then told Moses that he was to return to Egypt and bring the Israelites out of bondage and lead them to the very mountain that Moses was standing upon (Ex. 3:7-12). At the sacred mountain of Sinai, the children of Israel were to meet with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and sacrifice unto him, or in other words, they were to come to the temple and enter into a covenant with their God (Ex. 3:13-18). All this would be preparatory to the children of Israel going to the promised land.

**The Exodus of Israel From Egyptian Bondage**

Moses returned from Sinai to the court of Pharaoh in Egypt. To Pharaoh, Moses said, “Thou shalt let my people go” (Ex. 5:1). To no surprise, Pharaoh refused the request. Under the direction of God, Moses levied a series of nine plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 7-9).

The plagues were intended to accomplish two things: (1) to show to both Egypt and Israel that the gods of Egypt were false, and thus (2) to soften Pharaoh’s heart so that he would follow the only true and living God and allow the children of Israel leave Egypt. Each plague was designed to accomplish this by showing that the God of the Hebrews had power over the various elements that the Egyptians believed were controlled by their false gods. For example, the Egyptians believed that the Nile was controlled by the god Hapi. However, when the Lord through Moses caused the Nile to turn to blood (a sign of death), the Egyptian’s religious rituals could not stop the plague but only add to it. Hence, Egypt was shown that the god of Israel had control over the life-giving Nile and not their false deity, Hapi. Further, through the progression of each plague, Egypt and Israel was shown that the god of Israel was not limited in power but in fact the god over all the earth;

The plagues should have softened Pharaoh’s heart.
However, instead of softening his heart, Pharaoh hardened his heart (JST Ex. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10). The Lord then sent a tenth plague upon all Egypt including Goshen. This was the plague of the death of the first born (Ex. 10). The Israelites were taught that in order to avoid this plague, they were to participate in the ordinance of the Passover (Ex. 11-12). This was a special dinner which involved the eating of a roasted lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. After the “destroying angel” (D&C 89:21) went throughout Egypt killing the firstborn of every man and animal, Pharaoh relented and allowed the children of Israel to be released from bondage. Then God, represented by a pillar of fire and smoke, led the children of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 13:20-22).

The scriptural account tells us that God did not lead the Israelites out of Egypt by way of the nearest or quickest route which was “through the way of the land of the Philistines,” but instead “God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea” (Ex. 13:17-18). After releasing Israel from bondage, Pharaoh hardened his heart again, and led his army to recapture the Israelites. With Pharaoh’s army to their back and the Red Sea to their front, Israel was hemmed in. Seeing there was no apparent way to escape the Egyptians, the children of Israel complained to Moses regarding their plight. To this, Moses said, “stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.” Upon that, the Lord parted the Red Sea and allowed the children of Israel to be released from bondage. Then God, represented by a pillar of fire and smoke, led the children of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 13:20-22).

The Israelites were in the barren desert of the Sinai peninsula where both food and water were scarce. As the Israelites journeyed to Mt. Sinai, they hungered for food and water. The children of Israel murmured to Moses saying that it would have been better to have remained in Egypt where at least they had food and water. In consequence of their grumbling the Lord provided bread from heaven (manna) on a daily basis (Ex. 16) and on one occasion he had Moses heal bitter water (Ex. 15:23-26) and on another occasion he supplied water from a rock (Ex. 17). Thus, after leaving Egypt the children of Israel lived off the sustenance of the Lord.

The Exodus Story is a Type of the Plan of Redemption

The Exodus story has become a type and shadow of what an must do to escape the bondage of this world that comes because of sin so that he might enter into the promised land of the celestial kingdom. Just as the first step of Israel’s escape from bondage was the death of the firstborn, so the first step of our deliverance from sin is the death of Christ. As Israel followed Moses to the promised land, so we must exercise faith in living prophets who speak the mind and will of Christ whose words will lead us to exaltation. As Israel was led through the Red Sea to be saved from the destruction of the Egyptians, we must all be baptized to be saved from the eternal consequences of our sins. (In 1 Cor. 10:1-2, Paul tells us that the crossing of the Red Sea was symbolic of baptism. Further, note that the parting of the Red Sea is similar to the ritual of the cutting of the covenant in Genesis 15 where the animals were cut in half and the one making the covenant walked between the severed pieces.)

As Israel was fed bread and water from heaven instead of given the food of this world, so we must live the ways of God instead of the ways of the world. Finally, as we will now see, as Israel was brought to Mt. Sinai to enter into covenants with God before entering into the promised land, so we must be brought to the temple to enter into covenants with God that will prepare us to enter into the celestial kingdom.

ISRAEL AT MT. SINAI

In the third month of their journey from Egypt, the children of Israel arrived at the base of Mt. Sinai where they “camped before the mount” (Ex. 19:1). Their stay lasted for eleven months. It was the Lord’s intent to establish the descendants of Abraham as a unified people with one God and one religion. To the Israelites, the Lord said: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar [Heb., valued property] treasure unto me above all people . . . and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Ex. 19:5,6). It was also the Lord’s design to get the Israelites ready to “behold the face of God” or bring them into his presence (D&C 84:23).

The Preparatory and Higher Gospel

In order to be prepared to enter into the presence of God and receive all the blessings he had in store for them, Israel would have to enter into and keep all the ordinances of both the lower and higher or everlasting gospel. The lower gospel is known as the preparatory gospel and consists of “the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments [such as the ten commandments]” (D&C 84:26-27). Or in other words, it is the first principles and ordinances of the gospel (A of F. 4). The preparatory gospel is entered into by covenant. Upon entrance into the preparatory gospel, the initiate has entered into the “strait and narrow path” that leads to eternal life.

Once on the strait and narrow path, one must enter into the ordinances of the higher gospel before being qualified to come into the presence of God and live. The higher gospel is variously called the “the everlasting covenant of the holy priesthood” (JST Deut. 10:2) or the “holy order, and the ordinances thereof” (JST Ex. 34:1; see also Alma 13 and Moses 6:67). The holy order consists of the ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood. President Ezra Taft Benson stated:
“To enter into the order of the Son of God is the equivalent today of entering into the fullness of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is only received in the house of the Lord” (Ensign, Aug. 1985, p. 43). It is only by active participation in these ordinances that men and women can prepare themselves to enter into God’s presence (see D&C 84:19-22).

Israel Enters into the Preparatory Gospel

The first step in becoming “an holy nation” (or Zion society) worthy of entering the presence of God was for the children of Israel to enter into the preparatory gospel by covenant. Exodus 19-24 gives an account of the children of Israel entering into the preparatory gospel by covenant. To prepare for the covenant, the children of Israel were sanctified and their clothes were washed (Ex. 19:10-11). The mountain was also prepared by establishing a border around the base between the people and the mountain with the injunction that no one was to touch the border or pass beyond it lest they should be put to death (Ex. 19:12-13). On the third day, the Lord descended on top of the mountain, his divine presence being represented by “fire and smoke” (Ex. 19:16-25). In the hearing of the Israelites, the Lord gave to Moses the 10 commandments (or “carnal commandments”) as part of the preparatory gospel (Ex. 20; Deut. 5).

Exodus 24 records the ritual the Israelites participated in when they entered into the covenant where they promised to obey the 10 commandments. After putting the covenant into writing, Moses built an altar at the base of the mountain and placed twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel around the altar. Moses then read to the children of Israel the terms of the covenant. In response, the Israelites said, “All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient.” Then Moses sprinkled the blood of sacrificed animals on the altar (representing God) and the children of Israel (most likely the twelve stones) suggesting the retributive nature of the covenant (the same as when the Lord passed between the pieces of the severed animals in Gen. 15). That is, if the children of Israel broke their covenant they would suffer death even as the sacrifices from whom the blood had come. Moses referred to this as the “blood covenant” in these terms: “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words” (Ex. 24:8). (These words were used similarly by the Savior when introducing the sacrament of the new covenant in Matt. 26:28.)

Moses Receives the Higher Law

After entering by covenant into the preparatory gospel, the next step for Israel to become “an holy nation” involved entering into higher covenants or ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood. In preparation for this, the Lord informed Moses that he was to once again come to the mountain where he would receive tables of stone upon which these higher ordinances and laws would be written (Ex. 24:12). For forty days and nights, Moses was in the presence of God upon the mountain. Against common belief, this is the first time Moses was on the mountain for 40 days and nights. During this time, Moses received the higher law. Then the details of both the preparatory and higher gospel were written on the tables of stone “with the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18).

While on the mount, Moses not only received the tables of stone upon which the fullness of the gospel was written but he also received detailed instructions concerning the building of a portable temple commonly called the Tabernacle wherein the ordinances of both the preparatory gospel and the higher law could be performed (Ex. 25-31). The Hebrew name of the Tabernacle is ohol mo‘ed, which is best translated “tent of meeting.” This is an appropriate name for this structure because the Tabernacle was the place where the Israelites were to prepare to meet God and live in his presence.

The Tabernacle consisted of a large rectangular courtyard within which was placed the sanctuary. Entrance into the courtyard was through a single gate which located on the eastern side. The sanctuary was found on the western end. Between the gate and the sanctuary there was an altar for sacrifice and a laver (a large metal bowl full of water) for ritual washings. This is where the ordinances associated with the preparatory gospel (or Aaronic Priesthood) would be performed. Beyond the laver was the sanctuary or temple. The sanctuary was divided into two rooms. The foreroom was called the holy place while the back room was known as the most holy place or the holy of holies. In the holy place there was a seven-branched candelabrum, a table with twelve loaves of bread placed thereon, and an altar of incense. The altar of incense was placed immediately before a veil which separated the holy place from the most holy place. The furnishings of the holy place were associated with the ordinances of the higher gospel (or Melchizedek Priesthood). In the most holy place was placed an ark known as the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant represented the throne of God.

It appears from D&C 84:19-24, that the Lord initially intended that the children of Israel would pass through the ordinances of both the preparatory gospel (performed in the courtyard) and higher gospel (performed in the holy place) thus qualifying them to come into his presence symbolized by the passing through the veil into the most holy place (where God’s presence was represented by the Ark of the Covenant). However, as we will now see, Israel lost their right to the Melchizedek priesthood portion of the temple.

Israel Breaks the Covenant

During the 40 days Moses was on the mount, the children of Israel turned back to Egyptian idolatry. They fashioned a golden calf and participated in the fertility cult worship with its immorality (Ex. 32:1-6). In so doing, they violated the ten commandments they had covenanted with the Lord that they would obey. Hence, the covenant was broken, forcing God into the position of executing the demands of the broken covenant: Israel must be destroyed! At the moment God was going to satisfy justice, Moses interceded in behalf of his people, reminding God of the covenant he made with Abraham, saying,
“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever” (Ex. 32:13). In response, the Lord said: “If they will repent of the evil which they have done, I will spare them, and turn away my fierce wrath; but, behold, thou shalt execute judgment upon all that will not repent of this evil this day” (JST Ex. 32:14). We find within this story Moses as a type of Christ wherein he demonstrates the mediatorial role of Christ. Further, this story illustrates the powerful role of the Abrahamic covenant in the salvation of Israel.

When Moses came off the mount he found the children of Israel participating in the fertility cult worship. He threw down the tables of stone breaking them as a sign of the broken covenant and the loss of the higher law they would have received (Ex. 32:19). He then stood outside of the camp and cried, “Who is on the Lord’s side?”(Ex. 32:26). Those repenting of their actions came to where Moses was standing while the rest were executed by the tribe of Levi (Ex. 32:27-29).

Law of Moses Given in Place of the Higher Law

Moses returned to Mt. Sinai once again for another forty days and forty nights (Ex. 34:28) where he received divine assurance that the Lord would once again own his people and bring them to the promised land (Ex. 32:31-33:23). The Lord then commanded Moses to “hew two other tables of stone” wherein the terms and conditions of a new covenant were written. This included everything that was written on the first set of tables “save the words of the everlasting covenant of the holy priesthood” or the higher ordinances of the temple (JST Deut. 10:2; see also JST Ex. 34:1-2 and D&C 84:23-27). In other words, the higher gospel or Melchizedek Priesthood order was removed thus denying the children of Israel the ordinances that would enable them to come into the presence of the Lord.

In place of the higher gospel, Moses received what became known as the “law of Moses” (much of which is found in the Books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The prophet Abinadi said that the law of Moses was “a law of performances and ordinances, a law which they [Israel] were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:30). The Apostle Paul taught that it was intended to be a “schoolmaster” that would “bring [Israel] unto Christ” and the higher law (Galatians 3:24). Essentially, the law of Moses was a set of laws that were given to the Israelites that might be thought of as object lessons that illustrated the importance of the preparatory gospel and explain how it functioned. Hence, the preparatory gospel was the focus of the law of Moses. This law was not only to be the religious code of the Israelites but also their civil code.

After returning from the mount with the new set of stone tablets, Moses explained the new law and covenant to the children of Israel (Ex. 34:29-35:19). Then the children of Israel entered into a covenant to keep the law of Moses (Ex. 34:27-8). This covenant replaced the covenant the children of Israel had made in Exodus 24.

The Construction of the Tabernacle

Though the higher ordinances of the Melchizedek priesthood (those which would have been performed in the anctuary or temple) were excluded from the law of Moses, thus essentially cutting the people off from the sanctuary or presence of the Lord, the building of the portable temple or Tabernacle was nevertheless necessary. The reason was this: the altar of sacrifice and laver located in the outer courtyard, which were essential in performing the ordinances associated with the preparatory gospel, would naturally play an essential part in the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses. Further, the fact that the common Israelite was cut off from the sanctuary should have been a constant reminder that higher laws and ordinances were necessary in order for man to come back into the presence of God. The law of Moses did not provide these ordinances and laws. These must come at a future time.

How much of this the children of Israel understood is not known. Nevertheless the building of the Tabernacle was important to them in order to live the law of Moses. Consequently, after the children of Israel entered into the covenant of the law of Moses, “they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing” and brought all the offerings necessary for the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex.35:21). The Tabernacle was then constructed. After its completion, the cloud of smoke and fire (which led the children of Israel out of Egypt and which rested upon Mt. Sinai) descended upon the portable temple indicating God’s acceptance (Ex. 40:34-38). Further, the Tabernacle would be the residence of Jehovah and no longer Mt. Sinai. Wherever Israel went, their God would be with them. However, Israel would never be able to behold God’s presence for they remained cut off from the presence of God. This was dramatically symbolized by the veil that separated the holy place from the most holy place for according to the law of Moses the common Israelite could not pass through the veil into the most holy place.

ISRAEL WANDERS FOR FORTY YEARS

Having entered into a covenant with the Lord and built a portable temple, Israel was now ready to inherit the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The “camp of Israel” disassembled and began their march to the promised land (Num. 9).
The Forty Year Wandering

The Book of Numbers recounts Israel’s travels from Mt. Sinai to the borders of the promised land, which eventually took forty years. One of the major theological themes of the Book of Numbers focuses on holiness. It is the desire of God to dwell with his people. But that is only possible if the people remain holy which is obtained through obedience to the laws of the Lord. The rituals of the law of Moses were symbolic of what man must do to come into a state of reconciliation with God so that they might dwell with God.

The book is divided into three main sections. In the first section (1:1 - 10:10), Israel still at the area around Mt. Sinai prepared for their journey. A census was taken in which all the people were numbered (hence the name of the book) in order to form a military roster (ch. 1). The order in which the tribes were to set their tents around the tabernacle when camped was given (chs. 2-3). The placement of the twelve tribes around the tabernacle dramatized the concept that God desired to be in the midst of his people and that He should be at the center of their lives. In order for the Lord to dwell in their midst, the Book of Numbers makes it clear that Israel must remain holy. This was true even while marching. Laws regarding the purity of the people were given (chs. 5-8). Those who were unclean were to remain without the camp of Israel. Before leaving Sinai, Israel kept the passover (ch. 9). Israel would know when to camp when the cloud rested upon the tabernacle. When the cloud lifted they knew it was time to journey (ch. 9). Finally, the cloud lifted and Israel began their trek to the promised land (ch. 10).

In the next section (10:11 - 20:13) Israel journeyed from Sinai to Kadesh, just south of the land of Canaan, the promised land. In this section, Israel murmured and rebelled several times. Each rebellion constituted a breach of the covenant made between Israel and God thus rendering Israel unholy. Each rebellion ended with disastrous consequences. One of these rebellions must be discussed. After arriving at Kadesh, twelve spies were sent to spy out the land (Num. 13:1-25). Upon their return, they gave a report saying that the land is a fruitful land, “Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great” (Num. 13:27-28). This caused a stir among the Israelites. Caleb and Joshua, two of the spies, tried to convince the people that with the Lord’s help they could defeat the inhabitants of Canaan. But the other ten spies said, “We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.” The children of Israel believed the words of the ten spies and would not go into the land (Num. 13:30-14:10). The Lord then declared that Israel would remain in the wilderness until that generation of Israelites (those twenty years and older) passed away hoping the next generation would have the faith to follow the Lord into the promised land (Num. 14:26-39). Thus for forty years Israel “wandered” in the wilderness. The majority of their “wandering” took place in the Kadesh area.

The second section ends with the story of Moses and the waters of Meribah (20:1-13). Because of Israel’s murmuring for want of water, the Lord told Moses and Aaron to gather Israel before a “rock.” The Lord told Moses to “speak” to the rock “and it shall give forth his water.” But Moses did not follow the instructions exactly. Gathering Israel before the rock, he said, “Must we fetch you water out of this rock?” In saying this, he gave Aaron and himself the credit for the miracle instead of God. He then smote the rock with his rod rather than to speak to it. Though water came out, the Lord was displeased with Moses and his carelessness. Therefore, the Lord forbade Moses from entering the promised land (Num. 27:14). The lesson was clear: even the prophet of God must follow the directives of the Lord exactly or suffer the consequences. But before judging the Lord to hastily, it will be seen that the Lord translated Moses - taking him to heaven without tasting death. This reflects the Lord’s true feelings towards Moses.

In the third section (20:14 - 36:13), the camp of Israel left Kadesh and made their way to the steppes of Moab on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. Here they prepared themselves to enter the promised land.

The Book of Numbers records Israel’s “wandering” in the wilderness which lasted forty years. During that time, the children of Israel were led by Moses until they came to rest east of the Jordan River near the north end of the Dead Sea. While there, Moses delivered three discourses reviewing the history of Israel from the exodus from Egypt through the forty years of wandering. These discourses comprise The Book of Deuteronomy. In these discourses, the terms of the covenant or law of Moses were reviewed after which the children of Israel renewed their covenant with the Lord (Deut. 29:1).

Moses’ mission was now complete. He departed from the children of Israel, ascended Mount Nebo where the Lord showed him all the land of Canaan, saying, “This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying I will give it unto thy seed” (Deut. 34:1-4). Moses was then translated and taken from the earth. This was done in order that he could return to deliver keys to Peter, James, and John (Matt. 17:1-13).

References


6. See JST Deut. 34:5-7; Alma 45:19; Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 158.