Biblical *hesed* and
Nephite Covenant Culture

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The devastating late-nineteenth-century attack on traditional assumptions concerning the preexilic dating of the Pentateuch may have provoked the eventual explosion of twentieth-century scholarly investigation of the covenant culture of the Old Testament. Covenantal texts related to Abraham, Moses, David, and others had long been assumed to be foundational for the religion of ancient Israel, however limited modern understanding of that covenant culture might have been. But the new scholarly paradigm that dated those texts to 621 BC or later gave rise to a wave of skeptical scholarship about the whole tradition of divine covenants as the basis for ancient Israelite religion. The covenant tradition was being recast as a late invention built into texts as a way of rationalizing seventh- and sixth-century political and religious realities. And without a historical basis for the covenants of Abraham and his descendants, Israel would have no claim to a special status among the nations, and its God would have no claims to superiority over the gods of other cultures. To say that believing Jews and Christians felt threatened would be a huge understatement.

In other papers, I have summarized key dimensions of the Jewish and Christian traditions and the long-term decline of their concern for covenant, the resurgence of biblical scholarship focused on covenant over the last century, the unique interpretations of Israelite and Christian covenants, and the central role these covenants with God play in the Book of Mormon.[1] While most of the scholarly attention to these

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1. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Thought," in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*,

issues has focused on historical facts and the literary forms related to biblical covenants, a much smaller literature has now emerged that examines the moral structure of Israelite covenant society as depicted in the Old Testament. But it was not until the end of the twentieth century that these two lines of inquiry were fully united in the work of Harvard's renowned Semitist, the late Frank Moore Cross.[2]

Most earlier studies on biblical covenant had not sufficiently recognized how essential an understanding of the moral structure of covenant society is to an understanding of the nature of covenant itself. By defining the covenant as a device for structuring and managing kinship associations, Cross demonstrated the inextricable link between the biblical covenant and the moral code that made it work in the daily life of Israelites. The complex Hebrew term that refers to the set of moral expectations that applied to the Israelites' covenant relationships with their god and with one another is *hesed*.[3] Cross saw *hesed* as a secular moral code common to ancient desert tribes that had been enriched and adapted to Israelite religion in the Abrahamic tradition.

Biblical *hesed* and the Covenant Tradition

As will be explained below, Cross's approach dovetailed smoothly with the small but developing series of *hesed* studies being produced by biblical scholars. As a one-word summary of the actual character of Israel's God, Yahweh, and the prescribed moral character of his covenant people, *hesed* has emerged as a focal point for studies of biblical religion. The

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ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 295–324; "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 39–74; and "Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

2. See Frank Moore Cross, "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel," in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3–21.

3. The Hebrew words used in this article have been transliterated, or Romanized, meaning they have been converted from the original Hebrew letters into the Roman (Latin) letters used in the English alphabet. Scholars have devised, over the years, various systems of transliteration of the Biblical Hebrew script in order to preserve distinctive characteristics of ancient Hebrew pronunciation. The level of precision used when transliterating often depends on the purposes of the given article, what is needed for argumentation, and the intended audience. This article will use a more basic phonetic system of transliteration so that the converted Hebrew words will be accessible to the widest audience possible. The transliteration *hesed* is based on the Hebrew original חֶסֶד (goodness, loving-kindness, mercy), which can also be transliterated as *chesed, checed,* or *khesed.*

primary challenge in these studies has been that *hesed* has proven to be impossible to translate adequately into English. Hebrew scholars have offered a variety of translation options, including *mercy, goodness, kindness, loving-kindness, grace, love, covenant love, faithfulness, strength,* and *loyalty*—while acknowledging that none of these would be an adequate synonym for all contexts.[4] While the King James translation favors *mercy,* it uses another fourteen English words as translations for *hesed* in various contexts. One translation expert examined all the occurrences of *hesed* in Genesis and concluded that its wide range of possible meanings made it necessary to focus carefully on the context before deciding whether the primary element of the Hebrew word "be that of mercy, faithful love, obligation under some contract or agreement, devotion, responsibility to help, tender love, sympathy, or whatever else it may be."[5] English and most other modern languages have never been part of the kind of kinship association grounded in a covenantal ethos that prevailed in the world of Abraham and the twelve tribes of Israel that claimed him as their father. The problematic result is that modern Jews and Christians who depend on Bible translations may be severely handicapped in their efforts to understand the foundational concepts of their own religions.

In his 2009 Sperry Symposium lecture, Brigham Young University religion professor Dan Belnap mounted what appears to be the first and only focused effort to explore the meanings of Old Testament *hesed* for a Latter-day Saint audience.[6] Unfortunately, the LDS writings of the subsequent decade do not give evidence of much impact from Belnap's essay. While Belnap confined his study quite reasonably to the Old Testament, the rather obvious question it poses for members and students of The

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4. This translation problem is not unique to English or even modern languages. A. E. Goodman's study of early Psalters found that both the Aramaic Targum and the Syriac Peshitta Psalters provide "evidence of the apparent impossibility of finding any one Aramaic term which can adequately represent the different shades of meaning expressed by the Hebrew *hesed.*" See A. E. Goodman, "*Hesed* and *Toda* in the Linguistic Tradition of the Psalter," in *Words and Meanings: Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas,* ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 105–15, quotation on page 111. Throughout this paper, as in this instance, I have replaced Hebrew words in titles and quotations with transliterations.

5. Heber F. Peacock, "Translating 'Mercy,' 'Steadfast Love,' in the Book of Genesis," *The Bible Translator* 31, no. 2 (April 1980): 207.

6. Dan Belnap, "'How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of *Hesed,*" in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament,* ed. D. Kelly Ogden and others (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 170–86. Belnap's essay provides an excellent introduction of the Old Testament concept of *hesed* and its relevance for LDS belief and practice.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is this: To what extent do the teachings and culture of the Book of Mormon feature the same *hesed*-based concepts that characterized the preexilic Israelite culture that produced Lehi and Nephi and the civilization that sprang from them?

In this essay, I will first draw on Belnap and a host of other scholars of the Hebrew Bible to describe their most persuasive and relevant insights and contemporary conclusions about biblical *hesed*. I will then undertake a systematic exploration of Nephite language and teachings in the English Book of Mormon to determine whether or not they reflect that same *hesed* culture. My conclusion will be that the Book of Mormon text, even though available only in an English translation, clearly exhibits a commitment to the same distinctive concepts and ethos of the *hesed* culture of the Old Testament. I will go even further and say that these concepts and structures are even more obvious and clearly stated in the Nephite record than they are in the Old Testament.

Nelson Glueck

Scholarly investigations of *hesed* almost always build on the classic 1927 study by Nelson Glueck.[7] In his University of Jena doctoral dissertation, Glueck identified God's *hesed* with Yahweh's covenantal relationship with his followers in terms of loyalty, mutual aid, or reciprocal love. However, these terms are not just relative to the participants in the covenant but are understood to represent an ethical and religious relationship of reciprocity based in justice and righteousness, as well as faithfulness and loyalty.[8] God's *hesed* is gracious in that it derives from his oath, promise, or covenant and can be manifest in his strength and power on behalf of his faithful as he brings them aid and salvation.[9]

Almost a century later, it is easy to see that Glueck's training in archaeology disposed him to be more open to social science insights in his work

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7. American archaeologist Nelson Glueck first published his dissertation in German in 1927. As it eventually gained classic status among Bible scholars, Hebrew Union College sponsored an English translation by Alfred Gottschalk and an introductory essay, "Recent Studies in *Hesed*," by Gerald A. Larue under the editorial direction of Elias L. Epstein for its 1967 publication titled *Hesed in the Bible,* 1–32. I have used the only version currently available: Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* ed. Elias L. Epstein, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

8. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld settled on *loyalty* as the best all-around translation for *hesed* in her second monograph on that topic, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

9. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 102.

than the Old Testament theologians who took up the study of *hesed* in subsequent decades have been. He avoided the fixation on etymologies, cognate languages, and Christian theology that often characterized the work of the theologians and focused instead on issues of usage and word groups in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near Eastern cultural context in a way that is similar to the newer methodologies developed by linguists in the last half of the twentieth century. His work also displayed a keen awareness of relevant studies of the background cultures that may have influenced tribal Israel in ancient times. He cites the classic nineteenth-century studies of Middle Eastern desert cultures and even introduces his explanation of the role of reciprocity in biblical *hesed* by quoting W. R. Smith: "In primitive society, where every stranger is an enemy, the whole conception of the duties of humanity is framed within the narrow circle of the family or the tribe; relations of love are either identical with those of kinship or are conceived as resting on a covenant."[10]

Glueck restated this same idea from the perspective of his study of biblical *hesed,* which "is not some kind of arbitrary assistance, but rather that which the members of a covenant are obligated to practice reciprocally. This meaning of *hesed* as the faithful, mutual assistance among people who are bound together by a covenantal relationship mirrors, perhaps, the original meaning of the word. Groups were formed so that through reciprocal assistance common dangers could be combated and overall security established. This distinct kind of aid, as well as the whole relationship in accord with the rights and obligations of the community, was called *hesed.*"[11]

After decades in which Bible scholars fought through successive iterations of covenant theory in biblical studies, Frank Cross used the kinship studies of twentieth-century anthropologists to bring the study of biblical covenant and *hesed* full circle. In 1998, he portrayed ancient covenant as a device for bringing strangers into the tribe with all the rights and duties of natural-born members of kinship associations and concluded that *hesed* is a kinship term.[12]

The key insight for both Glueck and Cross was that the system of rights and duties obligating people to protect and care for one another in a kinship association could be extended to nonkin through covenants.

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10. W. Robertson Smith, *The Prophets of Israel and Their Place in History* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1882), 161.

11. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 82.

12. See Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3–6.

Covenants developed anciently in such groups as an essential tool for extending full membership to nonkin through marriage, adoption, alliance, friendship, or even servitude. What made Israel unique was not that they had their own tribal deity, but that Yahweh became their god and father by means of his covenant with Abraham. And because of that covenantal foundation in their relationship, they shared in the full set of reciprocal expectations. No longer was *hesed* limited to the set of expectations obtaining between the members of a secular kinship association. For Israel, *hesed* defined the expectations of conduct for each Israelite vis-à-vis every other Israelite but also toward Yahweh. It also defined expectations of God's treatment of Israel both as a people and as individuals. And what could compel God to take on such onerous responsibilities and to be patient with an often-wayward people as he tried to bring them back into a fully faithful and loving relationship? Only his own inherent *goodness* could explain such gracious behavior.[13]

Glueck's study engages every occurrence of *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the then-existing scholarly commentaries on those occurrences. The study begins with a careful look at the secular meanings of *hesed* as applied to human conduct in the Bible. He found six categories of relationships where the reciprocal obligations of *hesed* were in play: (1) between relatives and related tribes, (2) between hosts and guests, (3) between allies and their relatives, (4) between friends, (5) between rulers and subjects, and (6) between those in relationships where *hesed* was merited by individuals or groups that had chosen to render aid when it was needed but was not obligatory.

His exploration of the numerous secular examples of *hesed* led him to conclude generally that "*hesed* is conduct corresponding to a mutual relationship of rights and duties" or "to a mutually obligatory relationship."[14] He further concluded that "component parts" of the general concept of *hesed* include "principally: reciprocity, mutual assistance, sincerity, friendliness, brotherliness, duty, loyalty and love." Importantly, he also noted that "in the older sources, the common usage of *hesed* never means an arbitrary demonstration of grace, kindness, favor or love." Rather, the word was only used in a context framed by preexisting obligations and expectations of reciprocity. Because the purpose

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13. This precovenant *goodness of God* as it appears in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon is explored in Noel B. Reynolds, "The 'Goodness of God' and His Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 131–56.

14. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 54, 55.

of a covenant was to create the reciprocal system of rights and duties contained in a relationship of *hesed* where it had not existed previously, Glueck concluded that "*hesed* constitutes the essence of a covenant."[15]

The Ethical Version

Turning to the religious meanings of *hesed* and human conduct, Glueck first points out a sense in which the prophets, following Hosea in particular, tended to universalize *hesed* without focusing on Israel's historical covenants with the Lord.

In Hosea, *hesed* is a lofty concept, highly refined in the heart of the prophet. It is no longer conduct corresponding to a reciprocal relationship within a narrow circle, but the proper conduct of all people toward one another. On the one hand, humankind is regarded as one large family, and on the other, as children of one Heavenly Father. The word *hesed* signifies humans' readiness for mutual aid, stemming from a pure love of humanity; it is the realization of "the generally valid divine commandment of humaneness." *Hesed* does not reside in the punctilious offering of sacrifices or in external religiosity, but in ethical and religious behavior and the devoted fulfillment of the divinely ordained ethical commandments. In this respect, *hesed* as humane conduct is not different from the *hesed* of humans toward God. True religious motivation is discernible from ethical deeds.[16]

Micah seems to promote this same ethical or universal approach when he says, "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, RSV). Drawing on the writings of several of these minor prophets and Job, Glueck goes on to argue that "*hesed,* which formerly existed only between those who stood in a fundamentally close relationship toward one another, undergoes considerable expansion in meaning. Every man becomes every other man's brother, *hesed* becomes the mutual or reciprocal relationship of all men toward each other and toward God."[17]

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15. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 55.

16. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 57, citing J. Wellhausen, *Die Kleinen Propheten* (Berlin, 1898). The quoted phrase is borrowed from J. Wellhausen. Glueck's translator did not include reference to an original page number for the phrase he borrowed from Wellhausen.

17. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 61; compare Job 6:14; Psalms 109:12, 16; Proverbs 3:3–4; 16:1; Jeremiah 31:33; Zechariah 7:9.

In other similar passages, the idea that *hesed* included conduct toward God was only implicit. The "fulfillment of ethical and religious obligations" would lead to blessings. Showing *hesed* "to the sick, the poor, and the helpless, who may never be able to reciprocate in kind," would affect one's destiny. A man's "righteous conduct would somehow be reciprocated, since this is God's ordained plan for the world."[18]

"Blessing and salvation are the portion of one who practices *hesed*. *Hesed* entails a subtle kind of reward. Whoever views all men as members of his own family, and keeps the welfare of the whole human family before him, creates his own way leading to the kingdom of God (this is not expressed openly but is implied) and will achieve communion with God."[19]

These and other passages in the wisdom literature strongly imply that "those who fulfill the obligations of human society and of God's covenantal community shall enjoy their prerogatives and rights. However, those who do wickedly forfeit their rights in human society and will be excluded from God's covenantal community as well. Whoever wishes to experience *hesed* and *emeth* must first practice *hesed* and *emeth*."[20]

The same standards of human conduct determined who would be known as a just or righteous man.

> The *hasid* is the faithful servant of the Lord who gains communion with Him because he has proved himself worthy, through ethical and religious conduct. He relies on God. He practices justice, shows loyalty and love, and orders his daily life according to the divinely ordained ethical commandments. . . . The relationship between God and people was one of mutual rights and duties with *hesed* as the norm of conduct. It was a covenant-alliance based on *hesed* and existing because of *hesed* exactly as in the case of a secular alliance. The relationship could be maintained only as long as *hesed* was mutually practiced.[21]

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18. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 63–64; compare Proverbs 19:17. Eichrodt soon advanced a somewhat different perspective on these "ethical" passages in the prophets' writings by emphasizing that they derived from the intensely personal experiences the prophets had with Yahweh and arguing that "any attempt to deduce from this a morality essentially different from that of ancient Israel is doomed to failure," while recognizing that in their writings "the moral ideal of the individual was gradually transformed." See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament,* trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961): 1:359–65. This publication made the fifth edition of his two-volume 1933 work available to the English-speaking world generally. These quotations are from 1:361.

19. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 64; compare Proverbs 19:22.

20. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 65; compare Psalm 141:5; Proverbs 14:22; 27:6.

21. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 66, 68.

It will be important to note here the obvious time dimension involved for those who will be the righteous ones, receive communion with God, and be prepared to enter into his kingdom. In the Book of Mormon, the constantly repeated requirement of those who have repented and covenanted to take the name of Christ upon them and to keep his commandments is that they must endure faithfully to the end of their mortal lives if they would receive eternal life.[22] So with ancient Israel. As Glueck observes, *hesed* was understood to be "a task whose completion must always remain a distant goal. The obligations of the members of the alliance never ended; their mutual rights were valid for all times."[23]

Moving finally to consideration of God's obligation toward his people, Glueck concluded that "God's *hesed* can only be understood as Yahweh's covenantal relationship toward his followers." Accordingly, "only those who stand in an ethical and religious relationship to Him may receive and expect His *hesed.*" His covenant people could expect his "loyalty, justice and righteousness" to be displayed in his actions toward them. Glueck also noted that "in His *hesed* God manifests His strength and power in behalf of His faithful and brings them aid and salvation." All these conclusions rest on the historical grounding of God's covenant, promise, or oath by which he has taken on these obligations. God's actions toward his covenant people can be seen as exercises of mercy, but they differ from ordinary mercy in that because of his covenant he is obligated to provide aid to them in their need. So, while God's *hesed* is not the same as his grace, it is based on his gracious act in electing to establish this covenantal relationship with Israel.[24]

Rhetorical Side Notes

Like other students of the Hebrew Bible generally, Glueck recognizes the frequent linkage of *hesed* and *ʾemeth* (truth)[25] or *ʾemunah* (faithfulness)[26] as a hendiadys.[27] This rhetorical form occurs frequently in the Old

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22. This central Book of Mormon teaching is documented and explained in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Fifth Principle of the Gospel," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 3 (2014): 117–27.

23. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 68.

24. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 102.

25. The transliteration *ʾemeth* is based on the Hebrew original אֱמֶת (firmness, faithfulness, truth), which can also be transliterated as *ĕmet, ʾemet,* or *emeth.*

26. The transliteration *ʾemunah* is based on the Hebrew original אֱמוּנָה (firmness, steadfastness, faithfulness), which can also be transliterated as *ĕmūnāh* or *emunah.*

27. See, for example, Lester J. Kuyper, "Grace and Truth: An Old Testament Description of God, and Its Use in the Johannine Gospel," *Reformed Review* 16, no. 1 (1962):

Testament when two nouns in the same grammatical form are conjoined. The rhetorical effect is to see the conjunction of the two nouns as having its own combined meaning rather than seeing their separate meanings as additive. Glueck interprets *ʾemeth* as serving an adjectival function that emphasizes that God's *hesed* is trustworthy, that it is fully dependable, and that it lasts forever. This interpretation is not controversial in the literature.

But Glueck describes an additional complexity of *hesed* which may signal an additional rhetorical function that goes unrecognized. Merismus is also a common Old Testament rhetorical figure in which a part can stand for a whole, or commonly where mention of one or more elements of a known list can evoke the memory of the full list in the mind of auditors or readers. Glueck endorses the interpretation of Psalm 40:10 by Franz Delitzsch to show that the hendiadys *hesed* and *ʾemeth* also includes *righteousness, faithfulness, mercy,* and *salvation*: "Your *righteousness* I have sealed in my heart. I have spoken of your *faithfulness* and *salvation*; your *hesed* and *ʾemeth* I have not concealed from the great assembly. Similarly may you O Yahweh not seal off your *rahamim* [mercy] from me, may your *hesed* and *ʾemeth* protect me."[28]

Quoting Delitzsch, *hesed* and *ʾemeth* "are the alpha and omega of the qualities through which God manifests himself and which lead to salvation."[29] But once we see this, the door has been opened to let in all the other divine qualities entailed by *hesed* as identified by Glueck throughout his treatise. It is not a short list, as he points out in different contexts that divine *hesed* contains within it truth, mercy, righteousness, power, loyalty, justice, goodness, honesty, kindness, love of humankind, and other attributes. And so we can see at least the possibility that the frequent appearances of *hesed* and *ʾemeth* or *ʾemunah* as a hendiadys might equally well be read as merisms calling to mind the entire complex of moral qualities associated with God and his righteous people in covenant Israel.

4, where he explains that "the second term intends to confirm and enrich the concept of the first."

28. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 100, emphasis added.

29. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 100. An English translation was published in 1888 by T. & T. Clark (Edinburgh) and is now available as a photographic reprint as Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Bibliolife). See Delitzsch's discussion of this passage on pages 40–41. For a detailed explanation of this aspect of biblical merismus, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017), 106–34.

Hesed Is a Kinship Term

A major development for the study of *hesed* appeared in a 1998 essay by Frank Moore Cross in which he explained why studies of biblical *hesed* and covenant must begin with the social character of ancient Israel as a kinship association.[30] While twentieth-century anthropologists under-stood kinship associations and the ways in which that distinctive form of social organization shapes meaning and life experience for the kinship-association members, few other academic disciplines appreciated how significant these anthropological insights might be for their studies.

The social organization of West Semitic tribal groups was grounded in kinship. Kinship relations defined the rights, obligations, duties, status, and privileges of tribal members, and kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political, and religious institutions.[31] Cross explains how the benefits of belonging to a kinship group were based on the obligations that the members of the family or tribe owed to each other. Mutual protection was widely recognized as a primary obligation.[32] More important to the present study was the obligation to seek the welfare of one's kin—even to love one's kinsman as oneself, as one's own soul.[33]

Also of particular interest was the duty of redemption.[34] One principal Hebrew verb *gaʾal*,[35] "to redeem," is frequently translated "to act as a kinsman." The *goʾel* is a "kinsman redeemer" who acts on his duty to avenge a kinsman's murder, "to deliver or redeem property sold by a poor kinsman, to redeem the kinsman sold into debt slavery, [or] to marry the widow of a brother or near kinsman to secure his line."[36] The classic

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30. See Cross, "Kinship and Covenant." See also Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

31. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 3.

32. The nineteenth-century collection of detailed information on tribal and kinship beliefs and practices of the Arabian tribes and clans has been invaluable for the studies developed by twentieth-century historians, anthropologists, and Bible scholars. Probably chief among these has been W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia,* new ed., ed. Stanley A. Cook (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903).

33. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 4; compare 1 Samuel 18:1–3.

34. See the discussion in Daniel L. Belnap, "The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity," in *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise,* ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 27–66, esp. 42–43 and 62–63 nn. 28–30.

35. The transliteration *gaʾal* is based on the Hebrew original גָּאַל (to redeem, act as kinsman), which can also be transliterated as *gâʾal* or *gaal.*

36. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 5. Jennifer Clark Lane has shown how the kinsman redeemer role was established and effectuated between Yahweh and Abraham. See

kinsman redeemer is Boaz, who accepts the responsibility to step in to help Naomi and Ruth in their extremity. With many other synonyms available, Isaiah chose *ga'al/go'el* exclusively as the word he used twenty-three times for *redeem/redeemer.*

The Moral Culture of the Israelite Covenant Society (*hesed*)

Cross finds the work of anthropologists on small kinship groups to be both informative and fully consistent with the language of love (*'ahăbāh*)[37] and loyalty (*hesed*) that the early Hebrews used to hold the intimate relationships of family and kindred together. He draws from anthropologist Meyer Fortes, who concluded generally that kinship relationships assume a basic friendliness and the kind of "altruism exhibited in the ethic of generosity."[38] As Fortes goes on to explain, "kinsfolk must ideally share" because they "have irresistible claims on one another's support and consideration," and they "must, ideally, do so without putting a price on what they give. Reciprocal giving between kinsfolk is supposed to be done freely and not in submission to coercive sanctions or in response to contractual obligations."[39] Reflecting on Johannes Pedersen's analysis of the pact between Jonathan and David made because each loved the other "as he loved himself" and could expect "unfailing kindness [*hesed*] like that of the Lord as long as I live," (1 Sam. 20:17, 14, NIV), Fortes explains that "artificially created ties of kinship" such as this "*pact* of amity implies an artificial relationship. It connotes a relationship deliberately created by the mutual agreement of the parties, not one imposed by the chance of birth," and describes the institution of "blood-brotherhood."[40]

"The Redemption of Abraham," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 171. The transliteration *go'el* is based on the Hebrew original גָּאַל (redeemer, kinsman, avenger), which can also be transliterated as *gōĕl* or *goel.*

37. The transliteration *'ahabah* is based on the Hebrew original אַהֲבָה (love), which can also be transliterated as *'ahăbāh, 'ahavah, ahabah,* or *ahavah.*

38. Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 237.

39. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order,* 238.

40. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order,* 241. The early application of these ideas to biblical institutions and ideas was laid out in classic form by Johannes Pedersen, whose 1920 German treatise was published in English as *Israel, Its Life and Culture,* volumes 1 and 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926). An updated edition was released in 1959, followed by the English translations of volumes 3 and 4 in 1963. While the discovery and analysis of a much richer array of kinship systems in later decades precipitated a crisis of

Cross applied these basic anthropological findings to the ancient Hebrews and their distinctive moral system of *hesed,* which provided a prelegal, moral structure for their society. As he explains, the Hebrew term *hesed,* as used in the context of early Israel as "a society structured by kinship bonds, covers precisely this semantic field." Further, "with the breakdown of kinship structures in society, and in social meta-phors in theological language, the extended meaning of *hesed* became increasingly prominent. But its rootage in kinship obligations is primary. Strictly speaking, *hesed* is a kinship term."[41]

With the salient exception of Glueck, biblical studies of *hesed* before Cross were not usually attuned to the kinship origins of this concept and focused almost exclusively on the biblical text for their insights—resulting in the common claim that the language of *hesed* was covenant terminology. Cross and others reversed that with their discovery that covenant language in the Hebrew Bible was derivative of the earlier and more fundamental kinship language and that the meanings of *hesed* should be reconsidered in that context.[42] *Hesed* had a secular meaning in ancient tribal cultures before it was adopted by Israelite religion.

In this paper, I will focus on the teachings about God and man pre-sented by a selection of prominent Nephite prophets to show how the vocabulary and concepts they introduce fit well with the language and assumptions of Old Testament *hesed* as preliminary evidence for the compatibility of Israelite and Nephite covenant culture. While the words for *covenant* occur frequently in both the Hebrew Bible and the English Book of Mormon (*berit* = 287 and *covenant* = 154 times respectively), an examination of the moral culture of covenant in each text will go a long way toward ensuring that the covenant concepts in each are comparable.

Some Cautions and Caveats

There are several reasons why this kind of wide-ranging study must be characterized as exploratory, making no claim to be conclusive or definitive. Most importantly, when we apply the findings of Hebrew Bible scholars to interpretations of the Book of Mormon, we have only the English text, which we understand to be, in certain ways, an Early

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confidence among anthropologists as to the nature of kinship itself, the characteristics of the kinship system of ancient Israel as described by Pedersen, Fortes, Cross, and others have not been questioned.

41. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 5–6.
42. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 11–12.

Modern English rendition of Mormon's one-volume abridgment of a vast repository of ancient Nephite records which may have been written variously in Hebrew or in other languages that were probably influenced by ancient Hebrew origins.[43] Perhaps a wiser person reviewing these intimidating caveats would stop right there. But I am persuaded that the combined findings of linguists, archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and Bible scholars may have opened an exciting and promising new window through which we may be able to gain a significantly enhanced understanding of the Old Testament covenant culture and its potential connections to the teachings of the Nephite prophets.[44] Only time will tell whether this window is large or small, clear or distorted.

Both linguists and historians understand that human languages and cultures exhibit constant change over time. This poses significant challenges for a study like the present one, which attempts to draw some general comparisons and conclusions about certain cultural concepts and linguistic formulations that have persisted in one form or another across huge stretches of both time and space. While scholarly studies of the language and practices of ancient Israel cited in this study are mostly developmental in nature (diachronic), recognizing evolution and change over time, I have employed a characterization of these deemed to be as accurate as possible for educated Israelites living in Jerusalem during the last half of the seventh century BC. I then use this characterization in a static (synchronic) comparison with the text of the Book of Mormon without attempting to identify important developments in those same concepts and formulations across a millennium of Nephite discourse.[45] The textual examples featured in these comparisons are

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43. All quotations from the Book of Mormon, including punctuation and spelling, are taken from the Yale critical edition: Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009). With the collaboration of Stanford Carmack, Skousen has determined that the "words, phrases, expressions, grammatical forms, and syntactic patterns" of the original Book of Mormon "are archaic English" and conform well with Early Modern English (approximately 1450–1720). See Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part Three, The Nature of the Original Language,* The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and BYU Studies, 2018), 3:3.

44. See Reynolds, "Covenant Language in Biblical Religions."

45. The distinction academic studies draw between diachronic and synchronic methodologies derives from the great French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1983), 80–81. For a detailed discussion of how this distinction has played out in biblical studies, see Paul R. Noble, "Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *Literature and Theology* 7, no. 2 (June 1993): 130–48.

drawn from the founding period of Nephite civilization (Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob), the middle period (King Benjamin, Alma₁, and Alma₂), and from the very last writers (Mormon and Moroni). I have found the religious language, concepts, and ethos evident in these three periods sufficiently isomorphic to justify their employment in this exploratory study without probing diachronic issues. But I would also welcome further studies that may be able to identify significant developments across the Nephite dispensation.

Comparisons of Scholars' Findings about *hesed* with the Book of Mormon Text

Calling *hesed* a "gospel principle," Dan Belnap locates its continuing importance in "its emphasis on acts of deliverance in the Old Testament narratives and its insight on what it means to be like God in our own personal journeys toward salvation."[46] In all these examples, *hesed* is translated as *kindness, loving-kindness, mercy,* or *goodness.* While Belnap acknowledges the frequent association of *hesed* with covenantal contexts, he does not see that as essential.[47] In what follows, I will extend the discussion to a focus on the Book of Mormon. I will also employ the broader list of *hesed* synonyms that has accumulated in recent Bible scholarship as well as the insights about "kinship by covenant" or "kinship-in-law" that derive from Cross, Hahn, and others as will be described below.

Many of the refinements and extensions of Glueck's conclusions about *hesed* that developed in subsequent studies are relevant for a study of this topic from the perspective of the Book of Mormon.[48] Some of these emphasized the idea that for humankind, *hesed* represents reciprocal kindness. But the divine *hesed* of Yahweh is likewise conditional in that his covenant responsibilities are expected only as Israel obeys and loves him. Norman Snaith added the important qualification that *hesed*

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46. Belnap, "Gospel Principle of Hesed," 170. Belnap's study focuses appropriately on the Old Testament but does include a few references to Restoration scripture.

47. For a powerful exposition of the view that Israelite marriage was understood as a covenant, see RoseAnn Benson, "The Marriage of Adam and Eve: Ritual and Literary Elements," in *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scripture and Practice,* ed. Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 107–31. Benson draws heavily on Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994).

48. The principal contributions published during the first forty years after Glueck have been helpfully reviewed and summarized in Larue, "Recent Studies in *Hesed.*"

"denotes attitudes of *loyalty* and *faithfulness* which should be observed by both parties in a covenant." Snaith argued persuasively that *faithfulness* was a more accurate one-word translation of *hesed* than *kindness* and suggested *sure-love* or *covenant love* as even better terms to use.[49]

Divine Power

While Glueck and a few others have noted that God's strength and power is essential to his *hesed* as he blesses the faithful and punishes the wicked,[50] the scholarly literature lends very little focused attention to that aspect of divine *hesed*.[51] Old Testament theologian Edmond Jacob was convinced by Glueck's connecting of divine *hesed* with covenant in Hebrew culture and went on to observe "that *hesed* has no equivalent in modern languages and that etymological studies give little aid beyond the indication that the primitive significance of the term was 'strength.'"[52] In a 1981 study, C. F. Whitley examined a number of problematic passages for which Glueck's findings seemed inadequate and recommended *strength* as the primary meaning for each with specific variations in certain cases "to include such notions as fortitude, confidence, pledge, resolution and health."[53]

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49. Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1944), 95, emphasis added.

50. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 92–98. "In His *hesed* God manifests His strength and power in behalf of His faithful and brings them aid and salvation." Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 102.

51. One contributor to this literature is Sidney Hills, whose unpublished 1957 papers have been reported subsequently by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld in her *The Meaning of* Hesed *in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), 10–11, where she reports Hills's listing one of the seven features of divine *hesed*: that it "possesses certain marvelous characteristics: all-pervading initiative, *irresistible power,* never-failing constancy" (emphasis added).

52. As cited and summarized in translation by Larue, "Recent Studies in *Hesed,*" 28. For the English version and the full source, see Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament,* trans. Arthur. W. Heathcote and Philip. J. Allcock (New York: Harpers and Row, 1958), 103. J. C. Margot speaking from the perspective of modern linguistics strongly objected to the emphasis on a covenant connection by Glueck and Jacob, but this was all before Cross's work, which would seem to answer Margot's concerns and reaffirm Glueck's earlier approach. See Jean-Claude Margot, "And His Love Is Eternal (Psalm 136)," *Bible Translator* 25, no. 2 (1974): 212–17.

53. C. F. Whitley, "The Semantic Range of Ḥesed," *Biblica* 62, no. 4 (1981), 526. Whitley (520) also offered strong endorsement for the older suggestion of Felix Perles "that *hesed* means 'strength,'" citing Felix Perles, *Analekten zur Textkritik des Alten Testaments* (München: Theodor Ackermann, 1895), 76–77.

Regarding several of these, Glueck is resisting some scholars' suggestion that *strength* is synonymous with *hesed* and is suggesting instead that it should be seen as one part or manifestation of *hesed.* For example, he demonstrates that the proposal that *strength* be used as the translation for *hesed* is "justified only insofar as the meaning 'strength' is contained in the overall concept of *hesed.*"[54]

In comparison, the Book of Mormon texts repeatedly cite God's power as creator of the world and humankind and as triumphant over the power of Satan through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It is his power that guarantees his plan of salvation and his ability to bless and reward the righteous in this life and at the Final Judgment. As Lehi explains, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy *power* and *goodness* and *mercy* is over all the inhabitants of the earth" (1 Ne. 1:14, emphasis added). The same theme is echoed and emphasized throughout the entire book.[55]

Nephi appropriately rounds off the first section of his book by summarizing this principle: "But the Lord *knoweth all things* from the beginning. Wherefore he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men. For behold, he hath all *power* unto the fulfilling of all his words" (1 Ne. 9:6, emphasis added).[56] Alma echoes this teaching when he teaches the people in Gideon that "now the Spirit knoweth all things" (Alma 7:13) and speaks of the great things that the Lord does for his people by the *power* of the Holy Ghost. Lehi equates the power of God with the Spirit of the Lord (2 Ne. 1:27), and the Book of Mormon mentions twenty-nine times the important things that were done "by the *power* of the Holy Ghost."[57]

Knowledge

Similarly, Glueck and a few other scholars have noticed the significance of human's knowledge of God in relation to his *hesed.*[58] But the Book of Mormon emphasizes that God's knowledge is essential for his "works among the children of men" and that human knowledge of him is the means by which they can access God's love and covenant relationship.

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54. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 97.
55. See Reynolds, "'Goodness of God.'"
56. See also, for example, 1 Nephi 1:20; 3:20.
57. Noel B. Reynolds, "Language of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter* 33 (2019): 209–14.
58. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible,* 56–57, 86–89.

This principle is clearly laid out in Benjamin's address when he says to his people,

> I say unto you that if ye have come to a *knowledge* of the *goodness* of God and his matchless *power* and his *wisdom* and his *patience* and his *long-suffering* towards the children of men, and also the atonement which hath been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord and should be diligent in *keeping his commandments* and *continue in the faith,* even unto the end of his life—I mean the life of the mortal body—I say that this is the man that receiveth salvation through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world. (Mosiah 4:6–7, emphasis added)

The response of the people to Benjamin makes clear that this knowledge of God provides them with the essential understanding and motivation that leads them to engage in the covenant with the Lord: "And it is the *faith* which we have had on the things which our king hath spoken unto us and hath brought us to *this great knowledge,* whereby we do rejoice with such exceeding great joy. And we are willing to enter into a *covenant* with our God to do his will and to be *obedient to his commandments* in all things that he shall command us all the remainder of our days" (Mosiah 5:4–5, emphasis added).

The Character of the Nephites' Covenant Deity

One of the simplest and most direct ways of unraveling the complexities of biblical *hesed* as applied to Yahweh is to review the struggle of Hebrew Bible translators to find suitable English synonyms. Following Glueck, scholarly work on this problem peaked in the mid-twentieth century as exemplified in writings of Nathan Snaith, Lester Kuyper, and T. F. Torrance.[59] Contrary to the widespread popular understanding of Yahweh of the Old Testament as a stern, demanding, impatient, and punishing deity, this principal term describing his character and conduct toward his covenant people has been translated into English as loving-kindness, mercy, loyalty, faithfulness, truth, righteousness, goodness, and grace.

While it is not difficult to find Book of Mormon descriptions of the Lord as one who loves, nurtures, redeems, and defends his people—exhibiting the same *hesed* that today's scholars find characterizing Yahweh in the Old Testament—it also becomes immediately obvious that

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59. See, for example, Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*; Kuyper, "Grace and Truth," and T. F. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51–76.

the Nephites' early reception of the Christian gospel infuses a powerful extra dimension into their characterizations of the Lord and their understanding of what he does for his people. The Book of Mormon prophets explicitly recognized a divinely prepared "plan of salvation" or plan of redemption for all humankind—made known unto them by "the great God" in his *mercy* (Alma 24:14), a plan "which was prepared from the foundation of the world" (Alma 22:13).[60]

While the plan was universal in its application to all his creations, the special covenant given to Abraham established Israel as "his people," through whom the world could observe how God deals truly, lovingly, and faithfully with his covenant people through all their cycles of obedience and waywardness. Most importantly—as their Divine Kinsman, he not only redeems his people in this mortal realm from Egyptian and Lamanite slavery, but he also redeems them eternally from death and hell through his Atonement.

The Book of Mormon is even more emphatic and persistent than the Old Testament in reminding Lehi's descendants of their covenant relationship with the Lord.[61] While we do not have the original language of the text, it is striking that the English translation of the Book of Mormon features the same family of terms that contemporary Bible translators have used in their attempts to capture the complex meanings of *hesed* as it applies to Yahweh. It is important to note first that this Hebrew term is used in the Old Testament only to describe relationships and conduct within a covenant context where there is a preexisting tie (kinship or covenant) between the characters of a story and is not used for general examples of kindness, loyalty, or mercy between people not so related.[62]

God's love is portrayed as reciprocal in one sense, but literary readings have demonstrated that it also includes a deeper commitment, going beyond covenant, in which God's love explains his willingness to forgive covenant breakers. His mercy and his love for his people and his righteousness are fully in place prior to the establishment of the covenant and make the covenant strong and reliable over time for all human participants. Nevertheless, it is always clear that God's people will not receive the blessings of the covenant when they violate their covenantal responsibilities.

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60. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 1 (2020): 31–53.

61. For a detailed study of the three streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon, see Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant."

62. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 5–6. See the discussion in Larue, "Recent Studies in *Hesed*," 1–3.

The assumed background of all specific applications of the term includes a recognition of the fact that God is humankind's creator, that he is *all-powerful* and passionately committed to help fallen people become *righteous* like him, that there will be both successes and failures in the process, and that God will be *faithful forever* in his promise to help those who choose this path to return to him. God's *goodness* is apparent first in the creation of the world and humankind, second in the preparation of this plan of salvation, and third in his willingness to forgive those who repent.[63] He is *faithful* and *true* in that his promises are reliable, in spite of all opposition. He is *loving, kind,* and *loyal* in that he understands human weakness and provides people with the strength and knowledge to succeed when they seek it, and always forgives their failings when they repent. His overwhelming *goodness* and *grace* are evident in his creation of the earth and humans upon it; in his provision of the Atonement through his divine Son, Jesus Christ; and in his plan of salvation that makes it possible for people to be forgiven of their sins. And again, it is his covenants with people that establish this mutual relationship and inform this process. In all of this, it is the *condescension* of the powerful and perfect God reaching out to bless imperfect people in their need that is evident.

Once this package of descriptors has been identified in the Old Testament, it can be recognized repeatedly in the Nephite teachings about God and his relationships with that covenant people. In the sixty-two passages I have found that exhibit some conscious focus on the character of God and of his conduct toward his covenant people, it is these same qualities of biblical *hesed* that recur again and again—and against the same assumed covenant background. In the next section of this paper, I will show how the first generation of Nephite prophets established a Christianized version of this same Hebrew covenant discourse as a model that would be followed by their successors.

Divine *hesed* in the Teachings of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob

Lehi

Opening the Book of Mormon, one does not have to wait long for the Israelite conception of covenant *hesed* to make its appearance. The very first chapter of Nephi's writings establishes the basic Nephite concept of God. Nephi begins the record in the first sentence explaining that he will write this record because he has "had a great knowledge of *the*

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63. See Reynolds, "'Goodness of God.'"

goodness . . . of God" (1 Ne. 1:1, emphasis added). Responding to a dramatic vision of God in his heaven and the prophecies of his coming punishment of wicked Israel, Lehi exclaims, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and *thy power and goodness and mercy* is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And *because thou art merciful,* thou wilt not suffer *those who come unto thee* that they shall perish" (1 Ne. 1:14, emphasis added).

Lehi's statement is a straightforward summary of the Israelite concept of the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people. Nephi adapts it a few verses later to provide a thesis for his first book: "But behold, I Nephi will shew unto you that the *tender mercies* of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their *faith* to make them mighty, even unto the *power of deliverance*" (1 Ne. 1:20, emphasis added).

The linkage of *goodness* and *mercy* in praises describing God turns out to be typical of Old Testament hymns of praise as has been demonstrated by A. R. Millard. The Hebrew term for *mercy* in these passages is *hesed,* which Glueck has shown to be covenantal language. As Millard points out, these hymns of praise are based in "the thought that God has been performing His part of the Covenant-promises."[64] Millard provides several examples of this, including some that refer explicitly to the covenant relationship between Israel and the Lord: "The Lord is good and upright. . . . All the paths of the Lord are mercy and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies" (Ps. 25:8, 10).[65] Further support for the idea that *goodness* is a covenant term can be found in short research reports by McCarthy and Fox.[66]

As explained above, Glueck saw in the minor prophets and the wisdom literature a universalized notion of the *hesed* and even the *goodness* of God that comprehended all time and all peoples. But finally, as he argued convincingly, God's *hesed* was understood by the Israelites to be strictly linked to his covenants with them. In another paper, I argue that the Nephites saw *the goodness of God* functioning before the creation

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64. A. R. Millard, "For He Is Good," *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966): 116. Millard has argued that repeated Old Testament references to God's goodness should be seen as covenant language and as references to his *hesed.*

65. Millard's translation, "For He Is Good," 116. See also 1 Chronicles 16:34; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Psalms 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 135:3; 136:1, 4.

66. See Dennis J. McCarthy, "Covenant 'Good' and an Egyptian Text," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* no. 245 (Winter 1982): 63–64; and Michael Fox, "*Tob* as Covenant Terminology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* no. 209 (February 1973): 41–2.

and resulting in the creation of the world and the plan of salvation for humankind. But the Nephites also would invoke *the goodness of God* to explain his covenantal actions in fulfilling his *hesed* to his people in need. So they saw his *goodness* being operative both before and after his covenants with Israel historically.[67]

Nephi

Drawing on his lifelong experience as a prophet and leader of the Nephite people, Nephi introduced the account of his own first vision with an even more explicit statement of this context than can be found in the Bible—emphasizing God's constancy or truth over time: "For *he is the same* yesterday and today and forever. And *the way is prepared* for *all men* from the foundation of the world if it so be that they *repent* and *come unto him.* For he that diligently seeketh shall find, and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded to them by the power of the Holy Ghost as well in this time as in times of old and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore *the course of the Lord is one eternal round*" (1 Ne. 10:18–19, emphasis added). Nephi then immediately reminded his readers of the coming judgment and the high standard against which they will be judged: "No unclean thing can dwell with God" (1 Ne. 10:21). He clearly saw the covenant relationship as the key to men's relationship to God: "And also my soul delighteth in the *covenants* of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers. Yea, my soul delighteth in his *grace* and his *justice* and *power* and *mercy,* in the great and eternal plan of *deliverance* from death" (2 Ne. 11:5, emphasis added).[68]

And further, "he doeth not any thing save it be for the benefit of the world, for *he loveth the world,* even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him; wherefore he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation" (2 Ne. 26:24, emphasis added).

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67. See Reynolds, "'Goodness of God.'"

68. It may be significant that this statement is located precisely at the structural center of Nephi's second book, which is organized chiastically and focuses on his teachings about God's deliverance of his followers into eternal life, in contrast to the first book, which focuses on how God delivers his people from dangers in this life. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study," in *To Seek the Law of the Lord: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, Utah: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 333–49. For a revised and updated version, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: 2 Nephi as a Case Study," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, supplemental issue (2020): 177–92.

Nephi clearly understood the power of covenants to transcend the limits of blood relationships in the establishment of both rights and duties. By offering the gospel covenant to all his creations, the Lord opened the path to salvation to all of his children. With this universalistic and Christianized understanding of God's covenants, Nephi warned future Israelites, "As many of the Gentiles as will repent are *the covenant people of the Lord*; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For *the Lord covenanteth* with none save it be with them that *repent and believe* in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel" (2 Ne. 30:2, emphasis added).

Jacob

By inserting the teachings of his younger brother Jacob into his own writings, Nephi expanded his own account of the character and attributes of God and provided a vocabulary that would be repeated and refined throughout the course of the Nephite record. Jacob's account of the plan of salvation features most of the descriptive terms used by English translators of the Old Testament for *hesed.* In a long series of exclamations, Jacob emphasizes "the *wisdom* of God, his *mercy* and *grace*" (2 Ne. 9:8, emphasis added). "O how great the *goodness* of our God, who prepareth a way . . . the way of *deliverance* of our God" (2 Ne. 9:10–11, emphasis added). Jacob then points to the high standards of the final judgment, exclaiming, "O how great the plan of our God," according to which all men must "be judged according to the holy judgment of God," at which occasion "they which are *righteous* shall be *righteous* still and they which are filthy shall be filthy still" (2 Ne. 9:13, 15–16, emphasis added).

Continuing the same rhetorical praising pattern, Jacob extols "the *greatness* and the *justice* of our God," and that because he executes all his words "the *righteous,* the saints of the Holy One of Israel, . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God, which was prepared for them from the foundation of the world" (2 Ne. 9:17–18, emphasis added). He goes on to praise the great *mercy* of God, who delivers his Saints, and the *holiness* of God, who knows all things (2 Ne. 9:19–20). Further, "the *greatness* of the Holy One of Israel" is demonstrated by his firm linkage to the *truth.* But just as his "words of *truth* are hard against all uncleanness, . . . the *righteous* fear it not, for they love the *truth* and are not shaken[, for] . . . his paths are *righteousness*" (2 Ne. 9:40–41, emphasis added).

Turning from the Lord's high expectations, Jacob then goes on to recognize the divine willingness to work with men in their imperfect state as he exclaims again, "How great the *covenants of the Lord*! And how great his *condescensions* unto the children of men! And because of his

greatness and his *grace* and *mercy,* he hath promised unto us that our seed . . . shall become a *righteous* branch unto the house of Israel" (2 Ne. 9:53, emphasis added).

Jacob explains the unique way in which God is using the insider and outsider logic of covenant societies universalistically: "Wherefore he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish. . . . For they which are not for me are against me, saith our God. For I *will fulfill my promises* which I have made unto the children of men" (2 Ne. 10:16–17, emphasis added).

He then concludes this foundational sermon with the reminder that "ye are free to act for yourselves, to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life," with the additional caveat "that it is only in and through the *grace* of God that ye are saved" (2 Ne. 10:23–24, emphasis added).

Much later, in his own brief extension of Nephi's record, Jacob returns forcibly to these same things, rehearsing the same covenantal vocabulary.

> Nevertheless the Lord God sheweth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his *grace* and his great *condescensions* unto the children of men that we have *power* to do these things. . . . For behold, by the *power* of his word man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the *power* of his word. . . . Wherefore, brethren, seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in *wisdom* and in *justice* and in great *mercy* over all his works. (Jacob 4:7, 9–10, emphasis added)

Reflections of Biblical *hesed* in Nephite Preaching

The covenant culture of the Hebrew Bible portrays the people of God at their best when they exemplify the same virtues of *hesed* that always characterize Yahweh in his treatment of them. Unlike the heroes of ancient Greek literature or of modern American and European literature, outstanding Hebrews were noted for their *kindness* and *loyalty,* their *merciful* treatment of the poor and the weak, and their *faithfulness* to their fellows and to God.[69] There are several key reports of Nephite prophets teaching the people how to conduct themselves that present us with the opportunity to compare their expectations with those of biblical *hesed.*

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69. For a detailed exploration of the ways in which *faith* and *faithfulness* in the Book of Mormon usually convey the concept of covenant loyalty, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Nephite Prophets' Understanding of *Faith* and *Faithfulness,*" *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 73–97.

While Lehi and Nephi tended to reduce those expectations to the simple instruction that their people should "observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord" (2 Ne. 1:16),[70] more detailed descriptions are provided in the preaching of later prophets. Three of these prophets seem to address the need for a Christian version of *hesed*—King Benjamin, Alma the Elder, and Alma the Younger.

These all come onto the stage during the period of cultural change and assimilation resulting from the merger of the Nephites and Mulekites and then from the return of the Nephite group that had lived for two to three generations among the Lamanites back in the city of Nephi. All three explicitly invoke the context of their shared covenants with the Lord as background for the articulation of a set of expectations for appropriate conduct. Alma the Elder set the pattern when he formed the first church that became the model for the larger Nephite society. The results seem to follow the same model and point toward a Christian version of classical Israelite *hesed*. There is really nothing in the Old Testament that compares with these open and direct teachings from the Nephite prophets. In each case, the prophet reviews the contributions of the Lord, his continuing obligations, and his expectations for his covenant people if they will receive the salvation he has prepared and offered to them.

While this same analysis can be applied to the sermons and teachings of Alma's son Alma[71] and King Benjamin,[72] as well as other Nephite prophets, considerations of space dictate that this essay first lay out the pattern set by Alma the Elder and then pass over these other prophets and proceed to the final two Book of Mormon writers, Mormon and Moroni. These two faced much more difficult times in their lives because the descendants of Lehi had dwindled into total wickedness and internecine war that was moving inevitably toward the annihilation of the Nephites and the complete loss of their religion among the remaining Lamanites. Yet the covenantal *hesed* of the Lord continued to shine through for them and the tiny group of Christians that survived until the end.

Alma the Elder

Mosiah 18 tells the dramatic story of Alma, the repentant former priest of King Noah—and now follower of the martyred prophet Abinadi—preaching the gospel to his people in secrecy and assembling with them

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70. See also 2 Nephi 1:20.
71. See especially Alma 5–7.
72. See Mosiah 2–5.

at the Waters of Mormon to be baptized and to form themselves into a church. Alma's followers had progressed to the point that he invited them to enter into a covenant with the Lord to "serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [them]" (Mosiah 18:10). But as it turns out, this was not just a bilateral covenant between the individuals and the Lord as baptism can easily be interpreted to be. Rather, Alma also saw the covenant entailing a range of commitments to the other members of the covenant community.

> As ye are desirous
> > *to come into the fold of God* and
> > *to be called his people* and
> are willing
> > to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light,
> > > yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn,
> > > yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort,
> and to stand as witnesses of God
> > at all times
> > and in all things
> > and all places that ye may be in, even until death,
> that ye may
> > *be redeemed of God* and
> > *be numbered with those* of the first resurrection,
> that ye may have eternal life. (Mosiah 18:8–9, emphasis added)[73]

This compact covenant invitation articulates all three levels of obligation that characterized the ancient covenant tradition of Israel. Each person accepts the obligation to obey the Lord and his commandments. They also each accept responsibility to stand as witnesses of God at all times to encourage the faith of others while also supporting their fellow community members in their burdens, their mourning, and their needs for comfort. Finally, Alma also clearly articulated the Lord's obligations back to his people, promising that he would pour out his Spirit upon them in this life and grant them "eternal life through the redemption of Christ" in the life to come (Mosiah 18:13).

Alma clearly saw Christ taking the role of a kinsman redeemer. While there is obviously no *quid pro quo* contract concept here, we do see the divinely sanctioned covenant structuring a community that expects

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73. Jennifer Clark Lane uses this same passage to show how the Nephites' covenant with Jehovah created an adoptive relationship through which the Lord became their redeemer. Lane, "Redemption of Abraham," 173.

each to help others as their means and abilities would allow, including the redemption of captives—in this case, the redemption of fallen people from the captivity of the devil, as clearly articulated, earlier by Jacob and later by his own son Alma—the only one who did have power to accomplish this.[74] In every respect, Alma's description of the moral implications of the covenant reflects the classical Old Testament notion of *hesed* that was expected of Israelites under the covenant of Abraham, but with an additional focus on the dynamic introduced by the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Mormon and Moroni

The last two prophetic writers contributing to the text of the Book of Mormon lived in times of great wickedness when they could only share their full gospel understanding with each other and with a tiny core of faithful believers. Yet even though their brief writings were overshadowed by their struggles with the evils of their times, their understanding and endorsement of the traditional elements of *hesed* are readily observed.

As Mormon reminded the faithful, "that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually. Wherefore every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good and to love God and to serve him is inspired of God" (Moro. 7:13). Mormon firmly endorses Nephi's ancient insight about God's constancy and explains both contemporary and prophesied future declines in the occurrence of miracles on human faithlessness. "For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being, but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity" (Moro. 8:18; compare with 1 Ne. 10:18; 3 Ne. 24:6). "And the reason why he ceaseth to do miracles among the children of men is because that they dwindle in unbelief and depart from the right way and know not the God in whom they should trust" (Morm. 9:20).

Further, Mormon clearly sees "the covenants of the Father" as the mechanism that structures this relationship between the Lord and his people:

> And the office of their [the angels'] ministry is to call men unto repentance and to fulfill and *to do the work of the covenants of the Father* which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him.
>
> And by so doing the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place

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74. See 2 Nephi 9:25–28; 10:24–25; Alma 5:20, 25, 39–41.

in their hearts according to the power thereof. And *after this manner bringeth to pass the Father the covenants* which he hath made unto the children of men. (Moro. 7:31–32, emphasis added)

Finally, Mormon twice expresses his prayers for the future preservation of his son as appeals to the "infinite *goodness and grace*" of "God the Father" to keep Moroni "through *the endurance of faith on his name to the end*" (Moro. 8:3, emphasis added). The same appeal to the ethos of *hesed* characterizes Mormon's final prayer in behalf of his son:

> My son, *be faithful* in Christ. And may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up. And may his sufferings and death and the shewing his body unto our fathers and *his mercy and long-suffering* and the hope of his glory and of eternal life rest in your mind forever.
>
> And may *the grace of God* the Father, whose throne is high in the heavens, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who sitteth on the right hand of *his power* until all things shall become subject unto him, be and abide with you forever. Amen. (Moro. 9:25–26, emphasis added)

Moroni also emphasized the sustaining grace of God in his closing teachings and admonitions. He quotes words of the Lord spoken to him: "And *my grace is sufficient for all men* that humble themselves before me. For if they *humble themselves* before me and *have faith in me,* then will I make weak things become strong unto them" (Ether 12:27, emphasis added). Having faith in Christ does not just mean having a strong belief. In the covenant context of the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, *faith in Christ* implies *faithfulness to Christ*—to the covenant requirements of obedience to his commandments—through which a loving God can enable his people to become like him.[75]

As Mormon taught that last generation of Nephite faithful, "And thus by faith they did lay hold upon every good thing; and . . . men also were saved by faith in his name, and by faith they became the sons of God" (Moro. 7:25–26). Mormon went on to teach them that God would bless the faithful with charity, "which is the greatest of all. For all things must fail; but charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever. And whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with them. . . . Wherefore, . . . pray unto the Father . . . that ye may be filled with this

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75. This understanding of *faith* as *faithfulness* to the covenant is developed at length in Reynolds, "*Faith* and *Faithfulness.*"

love which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son Jesus Christ, that ye may become the sons of God, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him" (Moro. 7:46–48).

Similarly, Moroni repeatedly referred to the love the Lord has for the children of men as charity and taught that people must gain that same love through their faithful living of Christ's commandments: "Wherefore except men shall have *charity,* they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father" (Ether 12:34, compare Moro. 10:19–21). Moroni's final appeal to his future readers focuses once again on the covenant basis of God's relationship to his people and his design to perfect them through his love, grace, and power through the Atonement of Christ:

> And awake and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem! Yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion, and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled.
>
> Yea, come unto Christ and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness. And if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ. And if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in no wise deny the power of God.
>
> And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father, unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moro. 10:31–33)

Conclusions

This paper explores the possible presence of Old Testament *hesed* in the Book of Mormon, first by summarizing the most recent findings of Bible scholars regarding biblical *hesed* and then by sampling the writings of the Nephite prophets to assess the likelihood that they shared the same Old Testament concept. It recognizes the importance of approaching this question through an analysis of the standard expectations for individual conduct both of God and of his people in the moral culture of covenant societies that is termed *hesed* in the Old Testament. It is impressive that the family of terms that Bible translators have proposed as English equivalents for Hebrew *hesed* also predominate in the language of the

Nephites in their descriptions of God's character and relationship with his people—as well as God's expectations of their conduct toward him and toward one another. The Lord is the loving father and the merciful king of his covenant people. They are his sons and daughters by covenant. And if they continue faithful, he will deliver them from death and hell, and they will be seated eternally in heaven, pure and spotless, with the ancient covenant fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This paper follows the insights of Nelson Glueck, Frank Moore Cross, and others that the language of *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible is borrowed from the prelegal cultures of desert tribes in the ancient Near East that incorporated their own deities into their kinship-based social structures. The Israelites had adapted that language to the religion of Yahweh and his covenant with Abraham and subsequently with the people of Israel. While this paper does not deal with the additional adaptations scholars find in the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, or in the New Testament, it does explore the text of the Book of Mormon, which explains its own preexilic origins, and finds that it strongly reflects the cultural values of ancient Israelite *hesed*—while further adapting the Israelite language of covenant to the revelation of Jesus Christ and his gospel as given to the earliest Nephite prophets and preached by their successors over the next thousand years.

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