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Lee L. Donaldson

If the books of the Book of Mormon were placed in chronological order, the first book would be the book of Ether, the story of the brother of Jared at the tower of Babel. However, this story is placed after the reader has encountered the rise and fall of the Nephite nation. Why is the book of Ether positioned exactly where it is?

Imbedded in that question is the faith and understanding that there is always a purpose in the Lord's patterns and so there must be a divine purpose in concluding with the plates of Ether. The Lord told the Elders of this last dispensation, "I will give unto you a pattern in all things, that ye may not be deceived" (D&C 52:14). Elder Marvin J. Ashton noted that the "'pattern in all things' is one of the Lord's greatest gifts and promises." He continued, "There are patterns for all worthy things if we will search for them. 'And behold, it must be done according to the pattern which I have given unto you' (D&C 94:2). There is no other proven way" (21).

To understand the pattern of the structure in the Book of Mormon, we must first appreciate the essence of the book. The Lord, in chastising the elders of this dispensation, called the Book of Mormon a covenant: "And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon" (D&C 84:57). How is the Book of Mormon a covenant, and what is there in this sacred volume that makes it a covenant? Fundamentally, a scriptural covenant is a contractual promise between God and man. President Joseph Fielding Smith said, "A

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covenant is a contract and an agreement between at least two parties. In the case of gospel covenants, the parties are the Lord in heaven and men on earth. Men agree to keep the commandments and the Lord promises to reward them accordingly” (26). Anciently, these covenants that man made with God were entered into with a specific formula which bound both parties. The biblical scholar George Mendenhall identified six common steps in ancient covenants and treaties (*Interpreter's Dictionary* 1:714). These elements are as follows: (1) the preamble, (2) historical prologue, (3) stipulations, (4) blessings and curses, (5) witnesses, and (6) deposit and public reading of the covenant.

Each element of the covenant making process is vital. For instance, the preamble demonstrates the authority of the people making the covenant. The historical prologue to the covenant forms the foundation for the history of a covenant people. The stipulations lay out the requirements of the covenant for both parties. The blessings and curses graphically illustrate the consequences of keeping or breaking the pact. The witnesses serve to show God's people that all his actions were done without secret covenants. Finally, the deposit and public reading remind God's people of their promises and illustrate that his covenants stretch beyond an isolated time and people.

The overarching Book of Mormon covenant to obey Jesus Christ as the God of the land fits this very old pattern. A close look at the second chapter of Ether illustrates each of the six elements (see table on page 73). First, the preamble, like all ancient preambles, contains the names of both parties to the covenant. This preamble also mentions the physical location where the covenant is established. The tying together of time and place is important to lift the covenant beyond a metaphysical notion to a bond between mortals and a living God. Such a covenant affects people's lives in time and space.

The plates of Ether open with a specific historical event, the tower of Babel. The Jaredites, led by the brother of Jared, fled this ancient type of Babylon and came “down into the valley of Nimrod [and] the Lord came down and talked with the brother of Jared; and he was in a cloud” (Ether 2:4). The record carefully mentions both time and place. Furthermore, this covenant was formally created between the two authority figures: the king of this land, Jesus Christ, and the representative of the covenant people, the brother of Jared.

Anciently, the preamble also contained a token of the superior authority of the one setting the terms of the covenant. The same is true with the Book of Mormon covenant to serve the God of the land, as found in the book of Ether. Moroni noted that the Lord came down in a cloud. The cloud was a divine token of the power and glory of the king of heaven. For instance, this was the same token of authority that the Lord used in creating the preamble to the Sinai covenant with Moses (Ex 19:9). The cloud also led the covenant people through the wilderness (13:21) and was a heavenly sign of the Lord's authority in the Savior's transfiguration (Matt 17:5). Additionally, the Doctrine and Covenants equates the clouds of heaven with "the glory of the Lord" (D&C 84:5).

Second, the historical prologue of a covenant focuses the people's minds and hearts as they remember their history. Ancient Israel, for instance, always remembered the Exodus and the Sinai covenant as they recited their history. The brother of Jared's covenant to serve the God of the land became the focal point of Jaredite historiography. In fact, the whole Jaredite history was an account of how well the people kept their covenant to serve Jesus Christ, the God of the land. The covenant was put in force at the beginning of the Jaredite record (Ether 2:8), and throughout Jaredite history prophets warned the people to remember the covenant. For instance, Moroni notes that "the Lord did pour out his blessings upon this land" after Omer and Emer cast out the secret combinations and returned to serving Jesus Christ (9:13–21). Finally, Moroni concludes this tragic record with Coriantumr remembering "the words [concerning the covenant] which had been spoken by the mouth of all the prophets, and he saw them that they were fulfilled thus far, every whit" (15:3).

Third, the Lord clearly states the stipulations of this covenant. The record notes, "whoso should possess this land of promise, from that time henceforth and forever, should serve him, the true and only God" (Ether 2:8). The text clearly states that the true and only God of this land "is Jesus Christ" (v 12). This service to the Savior is to be full and complete. The Lord does not allow divided loyalties from his people in the promised land. Moroni's final assessment of the Jaredites revolves around their refusal to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant. He wrote, "For behold, they rejected all the words of Ether; for he truly told them of all things, from the beginning of man; and that after the waters had receded from off the face of this

land it became a choice land above all other lands, a chosen land of the Lord; wherefore the Lord would have that all men should serve him who dwell upon the face thereof” (Ether 13:2).

The fourth covenantal element suggested by Mendenhall, the blessings and curses, is also laid out in the covenant the Lord established with the Jaredites. Obedience to this covenant insures that the inhabitants of this land will “be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven” (Ether 2:12). Disobedience brings down the judgments of God so that “they should be swept off” the face of the land (v 8). Total destruction occurs when the people are “ripened in iniquity” (v 9).

Fifth, this covenant is made with witnesses. The prophet Ether personally stood as an eyewitness to the terrible fulfillment of the curses of the covenant and “beheld that the words of the Lord had all been fulfilled; and he finished his record” (Ether 15:33). In fact, we also become witnesses to this covenant as we read the Book of Mormon. Moroni notes as he records the account of the covenant, “we can behold the decrees of God concerning this land” (2:9).

Lastly, this covenant is deposited and read publicly for every nation that comes to the promised land. Prophets sent to the Jaredites either read or quoted the covenant to them frequently (Ether 7:23; 9:28; 11:1, 12, 20). They reminded the Jaredites to serve the Lord or “the Lord God would send or bring forth another people to possess the land, by his power, after the manner by which he brought their fathers” (11:21). Furthermore, Moroni promises that each nation possessing the promised land will have access to the words of the covenant: “Whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written” (2:12). The Jaredite covenant was also read during the reign of king Mosiah (Mosiah 28:17–19). The final recorded act of Ether’s life was to deposit the record “in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33).

A broader look at the Book of Mormon reveals that this same covenant to serve Jesus Christ as the God of this land is also part of the plates of Nephi and the plates of Mormon. This covenant has the

same elements as the Jaredite covenant. Below, in Figure 1, the elements of the Book of Mormon covenant are listed with the parallels from the plates of Nephi, Mormon, and Ether.

Figure 1

Elements	Plates of Nephi	Plates of Mormon	Plates of Ether
Preamble	2 Ne 1:5–6	Alma 36:1	2:7
Historical Prologue	2 Ne 1:9	Alma 36:2	2:12
Stipulations	2 Ne 1:7	Alma 36:1	2:8–10
Blessings and Curses	2 Ne 1:7	Alma 36:1, 30	2:8–10
Witness	2 Ne 1:9	Alma 36:5	2:9
Deposit of the Covenant	2 Ne 1:9–12	Alma 37:1–2	2:12

An interesting motif in this covenant is a right to inherit a promised land. Why is the promised land emphasized? We must realize that this promised land motif extends beyond the American continent. The promised land is a type for the promised reward of the faithful. The only way an individual can obtain the celestial land of promise is to enter into a covenant to serve the true God of this earth—Jesus Christ. This quest for the celestial land of promise is the focus of the covenant of the Book of Mormon. Why is this same covenant given in all three sets of plates? Is it significant that the Lord selected three different sets of plates to establish his covenant? Finally, what sets the Jaredite record apart, that it was placed at the end of the Book of Mormon?

First, having a set of three in making covenants is an ancient pattern. For instance, the baptismal covenant is made “in the name of

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 11:25). Abraham divided three animals as he entered into the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:9). Each of these animals needed to be three years old. Three times Peter was shown the same vision of the unclean animals which represented that the gospel covenants were to be taken to the gentiles (Acts 10:16).

The ancient covenantal pattern of repeating or having something done three times or three ways is also fulfilled in multiple ways in the Book of Mormon. Moroni, in the middle of his abridgment of the Jaredite record, prophesies that “in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three . . . shall stand against the world at the last day” (Ether 5:4). This “new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (D&C 84:57) has been established like other covenants by having three witnesses.

Traditionally, we think of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon as Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer. Certainly, they do stand as latter-day witnesses to the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. However, there are additional sets of three witnesses to this sacred record. Moroni declared that the “Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record” (Ether 5:4). Also, three branches of the House of Israel, the Jews, the Nephites, and the lost tribes, each kept a record, and each branch will eventually receive the others’ records (2 Nephi 29:12–14). These three branches of the House of Israel will also become a set of three witnesses in the latter-days.

However, another set of three witnesses, the three sets of plates that make up the Book of Mormon, is in the forefront in establishing the Book of Mormon. The plates of Nephi, the plates of Mormon, and those of Ether stand as vital components in establishing the Book of Mormon covenant. Each set of plates contains each of the six elements of the ancient covenant and also serves to illustrate the ramifications of the covenant to a different nation.

The first set, the plates of Nephi, contains the story of a family and their struggles to keep their covenants. The second set, the plates of Mormon, records the Nephite nation’s struggles to keep those same covenants. The third set, the plates of Ether, merges the plates of Nephi and Mormon. It begins, like the plates of Nephi, with the story of a family and develops, like the plates of Mormon, into the story of a nation.

Figure 2

Plates of Nephi	Plates of Mormon
A Family	A Nation

Plates of Jared	
A Family	—————→ A Nation

From this we can begin to understand why the plates of Ether were placed after the plates of Nephi and Mormon. They serve as the final element of the covenant process and recapitulate the Book of Mormon covenant. The recapitulation or covenant renewal element, consistent with the ancient pattern, contains all the parts of the covenant. Therefore, it was important for Moroni to place the book of Ether at the end of the Book of Mormon record to place our dispensation under covenant. The Ether summary to the Nephite record underscores the constant theme that a covenant family and nation must obey the God of this land or be destroyed.

The book of Ether testifies of the same message as the other two sets of plates: keep your covenant to serve the God of this land and be blessed, or break your covenant and be destroyed. This covenant applies to both family and nation. Beyond the covenant, the Jaredite story summarizes the Nephite account in two additional ways: the Jaredite civilization passes through the same tragic cycle of prosperity, pride, and plague as the Nephites, and the Jaredites share a parallel record with their Nephite counterparts.

First, the tragic cycle of prosperity, pride, and plague is a supporting theme to remind the people to keep their covenants. The Lord always sends prophets and plagues before he totally destroys his covenant people. He also withdraws peace from the land. This theme pervades both the Jaredite and Nephite records. God continues striving to reclaim his people by sending prophets and plagues to stir them

up in remembrance of the covenant. The Lord never completely destroys the people until they are “ripened in iniquity” (Ether 2:9) and can no longer keep the covenant.

Ether’s record, like the records of Nephi and Mormon, graphically paints the same vivid picture of this cycle of God calling back his chosen people. The people alternate between keeping and breaking their covenants to the Lord. The cycle begins with the people being delivered by the hand of the Lord, then they prosper in the land, they grow in pride and wickedness, and they are finally brought down by their own iniquities. Interestingly, this same pattern is repeated six times in the book of Ether before the complete destruction of the Jaredites.

Figure 3: Six Tragic Cycles in the Book of Ether

	Delivered	Prosper	Pride & Iniquity	Brought Down
Cycle 1	1:33–6:12	6:18, 28	7:4–19	7:20–25
Cycle 2	7:26	7:27	8:2–17	9:1, 12
Cycle 3	9:2–3	9:16–20	9:26–29	9:30–34
Cycle 4	9:35	9:35–10:4	10:5–10	10:11–15
Cycle 5	10:15	10:16–29	10:30	11:7
Cycle 6	11:8		11:10–15	11:19–12:3; 13:15–15:31

Second, the Book of Mormon authors paint a similar picture between the Nephites and Jaredites so we can see the effects of the covenant in both civilizations. For instance, the Jaredite record begins, like the Nephite record, with a family being delivered from imminent destruction by the hand of the Lord. Lehi’s homeland was about to be captured by the Babylonians, and Jared’s fellow citizens were about to be scattered at the tower of Babel. Both Babel and

Babylon share the same Hebrew root word which means *confusion*. Both Lehi and the brother of Jared were saved from this confusion or chaos by divine intervention.

The family of Jared, like the Lehites, received divine instructions on how to construct a vessel to cross the ocean (1 Nephi 17:8; Ether 2:16). Their ships' design came from the Lord and not man. This same divine help protected the two different families as they crossed the ocean. This ocean was described by the same term, many waters, in both texts (1 Nephi 17:5; Ether 6:7). *Many waters* is "an Old Testament expression which often designates the waters of chaos" (*Interpreter's Dictionary* 4:816). The Lord was the only one who could help both families pass through the chaos to the promised land.

They also gathered provisions for the trip in a similar manner, and both groups were told to gather seeds of every kind (1 Nephi 8:1; Ether 1:41). This gathering was followed by a vision concerning Lehi's seed and a blessing on the seed of the Jaredites. The blessings for the seed of these two nations were contingent on keeping covenants. Both parties were then placed under the same covenant to worship God or be swept off the face of the promised land (2 Nephi 1:1–12; Ether 2:8).

The Jaredites and the Lehites also spent a preparatory time in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:4; Ether 2:13), which was punctuated for both groups by multiple visions (1 Nephi 10–14; Ether 2–3). Finally, both groups were divinely protected as they crossed the ocean (1 Nephi 18:8–23; Ether 6:4–11).

These parallels continued throughout the records of both civilizations. There was a division in both groups. The Nephites broke off from the Lamanites, and the kingdoms of Shule and Cohor also broke off from each other. Additionally, there was the continual rise and fall of wicked governments. Riplakish, like wicked king Noah, had many wives and concubines, laid a grievous tax on his people, built spacious buildings, and eventually suffered a violent death (Ether 10:4–8).

The Jaredites, like their Nephite counterparts, also had prophets come among them to call them to repentance. This repentance was followed by prosperity (Ether 7:23–26). Unfortunately, this prosperity, like the Nephite success, was followed by someone coming with cunning words to gain power (Ether 8:2). This power grabbing divided both nations.

Finally, both groups were destroyed by the same insidious secret oaths and combinations. Moroni points out, “Their oaths and combinations . . . have caused the destruction of this people of whom I am now speaking, and also the destruction of the people of Nephi” (Ether 8:20–21). Thus, both accounts are records of a fallen people (D&C 20:9) and serve as two witnesses to our nation and generation.

The book of Ether is at the end of the Book of Mormon to serve as the third leg in the covenantal triad and testify to Book of Mormon readers that they must serve God or be swept off the face of the land. The record of the Jaredite nation in the 15 chapters of Ether summarizes the tragic theme of the 15 books of the Book of Mormon and is a prophetic reminder that our own survival depends on our ability to make and keep covenants.

In conclusion, the Lord has provided three sets of plates to establish his covenant with our dispensation. These three sets of plates show that God’s plan are the same for both the Nephites and the Jaredites. The Book of Mormon is divinely designed to prove “to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12). The plates of Ether are divinely placed to establish the covenant with latter-day readers and to warn them away from a similar fall.

The Nephite and Jaredite voices come from the dust to call our own dispensation to repentance. President Marion G. Romney declared,

In America two great civilizations, the Jaredite and the Nephite, were completely annihilated because of their rejection of the laws of righteousness which God revealed unto them. In both cases, the Lord, through His prophets, pointed out their iniquities, warned them, and predicted their destruction if they did not repent. This they did not do. Consequently they were totally destroyed. We today are approaching the close of a similar cycle. We have been warned that we are ripening in iniquity and that we will be destroyed if we do not repent. (14–15)

We become the third Book of Mormon civilization to enter into the covenant to serve Jesus Christ, the God of this land. The Book of Mormon record of the covenant becomes our own record. Our

civilization's survival, like that of the Nephite and Jaredite nations, depends on our keeping the covenant to serve Jesus Christ as the God of this land.

The plates of Ether, like the plates of Nephi and Mormon, witness of the great latter-day Book of Mormon covenant of the Eternal God. We may choose to keep our covenants and prosper or break these sacred oaths and be destroyed. This covenant has been established, like ancient covenants, by three separate sets of plates within the Book of Mormon. Moroni promised that these plates would be shown "unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work" (Ether 5:2). Figuratively, we are shown these plates as we ponder the Book of Mormon so that we can "know of a surety that these things are true. And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work, in the which shall be shown forth the power of God and also his word, of which the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record—and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day" (vv 3–4).

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