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THE OATH AND COVENANT OF THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD
An Exegesis

by

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PREFACE

I began researching this article in the early 1970s and wrote a preliminary version of it in 1977, while I was a law student. In 1983 I revised it, adding some notes and changing the text for clarity. In late 1987 I prepared a shorter version for publication in Sunstone Magazine, September 1987, Vol. 11.5, p. 30-37. That published version could not, because of space considerations, contain many of the notes I had originally included, so Sunstone offered this longer version to interested readers for \$10.00.

There are discrepancies between the two versions. The shorter, more recent published version contains my more mature conclusions, while the older, longer version contains a better statement of my sources, evidence, and notes.

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WHAT IS THE OATH AND COVENANT OF THE PRIESTHOOD
AND BY WHOM AND TO WHOM IS IT MADE?

To the first of these three questions, the following answers are usually given:

1. The terms "oath" and "covenant" are synonymous and refer to a two-party contract between God and an individual.

2. The terms "oath" and "covenant" are not synonymous, but refer instead to the two sides of a bilateral agreement in which a man's promise (i.e., the "covenant") is given in exchange for God's promise (i.e., the "oath")--or, perhaps, vice versa (man makes the "oath" and God makes the "covenant") it doesn't seem to matter. This contractual arrangement is entered into at the time an individual is ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood. The essence of the promises are that the man will keep all of God's commands and God will give to him priesthood power. Such a contract is entered into generally by all Melchizedek Priesthood bearers at the time they are ordained.

3. The "oath and covenant" does not refer to a contract at all. Both terms refer to a man's promise to God that he will obey all of God's commandments and thereby qualify himself to receive "all that [the] Father hath." This promise is made at the time he receives the Melchizedek Priesthood. If the man fails to keep the commandments, he is guilty of breaking the oath and covenant which he made.

4. The "oath and covenant" does not refer to a man's promise to God, but to God's promise to a man of "all that [the] Father hath"; this "oath and covenant" is given on the condition of and as an inducement for a man's future obedience to God's commandments.

One of the chief purposes of this article is to demonstrate that none of these explanations of the phrase "oath and covenant" is true.

Covenants and Oaths. Oaths and covenants are not the same, either in form or purpose. An "oath" is a ritual of swearing or attestation. ⁶ whereas, a covenant is usually a promise. It takes ⁷ two or more promises to make a modern contract. However, under

ancient rules of English law, a person could bind himself as if by contract by making a single, one-sided covenant or promise and then sealing it with an oath. That is, he would make a promise to do something or to refrain from doing something, and then he would go through a ritual ceremony of swearing an oath that he would keep that promise.⁸ The oath and the covenant, then, were two separate and distinct though related formulas.

Furthermore, the idea that a "covenant" is in every case a two-party contract is contradicted by numerous authorities.⁹ For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines covenant variously as "undertaking," "mutual agreement," "compact," "contract," "pledge," "bargain," "promise," and "vow." Notably, however, in its theological sense, the term "covenant" refers to "an engagement entered into by the Divine Being with some other being or person."¹⁰ The nature of this "engagement" is an important subject of Old and New Testament study. Scholars in this field tell us that the Hebrew word berit, from which the term "covenant" is translated,¹¹ does not refer merely to contracts in which mutual promises are made and something of value is bargained-for and given in exchange for something of comparable value received in return.¹² It refers, instead, to any of three different types of "engagements":¹³

(1) mutually assumed obligations that create the type of bilateral contract already mentioned and which is common in modern business transactions;

(2) one-sided obligations laid on the weaker party by the stronger, as typified by the Sinai covenant in which God (as the king or suzerain) bound Israel (God's vassal), but did not bind himself;¹⁴ and