

# What Covenant Will God Receive in the Desert?

*By Eugene England*

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**W**HAT COVENANT WILL God receive in the desert? Only a covenant of peace, I believe, a covenant of peace with the land. A covenant is not a bargain, a contract as we have sometimes thought, but a gift of grace from God, which we can accept graciously or refuse. We can, in turn, give gifts to God and his children in righteousness, in peace with each other, in respect for the land.

God gave such a covenant to ancient Israel in the desert, and Isaiah sang, “The wilderness and the solitary places shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.” (Isa. 35:1.) God gave the same covenant to modern Israel, and modern prophets quoted Isaiah: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isa.40:3.) “For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he shall make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.” (Isa. 51:3.)

But in this place, at the Nevada test site, the desert has not blossomed with roses, but with mushrooms—huge blooms of death, germinated in dark caves underground. Our chosen nation has departed from the covenant, just as ancient Israel did. The Hebrew psalmist mourned concerning his people, “They soon forgot his works; they waited not for [the Lord’s] counsel: But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.” (Ps. 106:13–15.) We have tempted God in the desert, developing our weapons at Los Alamos and Jackass Flat, and God has given us our request: we have become the mightiest, the only superpower—and yet we have missiles still poised to destroy the world and are anxious to test more. Oh, how the mighty have fallen; God has sent leanness into our souls.

How did it happen, and what part have we played—can we play—as Mormons?

## ACCOMMODATING THE WORLD’S VIOLENCE

*After a century of retrenchment, the Church is now capable  
of renouncing violence and taking the gospel of peace to all the world.*

ON 24 APRIL 1898, Apostle Brigham Young Jr. gave the last in a series of speeches he made against Mormon involvement in the impending Spanish-American War. Consistent with the attitude of his father during the Civil War and Church leaders generally to that point in Mormon history, he urged the Saints to remain aloof from the nation's violence: "If I knew of any young men who wanted to go to this war," he said, "I would call them on a mission to preach the gospel of peace." The next day Congress declared war, and Elder Young's half-brother, Willard Young, and his nephew, Richard W. Young, both West Point graduates, called on the First Presidency. They objected to Elder Young's remarks of the day before and said they had volunteered for service in the war and intended to recruit other volunteers in Utah.

In response, President Wilford Woodruff departed from the views of his predecessors and announced that "Utah should stand by the government in the present crisis and that our young men should be ready to serve their country when called upon." Of this crucial juncture in Mormon history, President Woodruff's biographer Thomas G. Alexander writes: "Moving in a direction evident at least since the 1887 Constitutional Convention but nevertheless crossing an immense intellectual Rubicon, Woodruff subordinated the ideal of the kingdom of God to the ideal of loyalty to the United States. In order to prove Latter-day Saint patriotism, he proposed to offer the ultimate sacrifice—the blood of Mormon youth—to the nation."<sup>1</sup>

During most of the nineteenth century the Church was in a mode of what historian Jan Shipps has called "radical restoration," with social, political, and moral institutions and attitudes fundamentally at odds with the world, including America. The challenge (and the success) of the Mormon kingdom generated opposition that by 1890 had nearly destroyed the Church. The Church then entered a period of conservative accommodation and preservation, including the end of polygamy and of theocratic politics and economics. This stage of retrenchment was apparently necessary, not only for survival, but to enable us to build in the United States a strong base for taking the gospel to all the world in preparation for Christ's coming. But one of the costs was an accommodation to this world's violence, especially that of a particular nation, the United States.

Now, one hundred years later, we are indeed able to take the gospel to virtually all the world. On 6 March 1993, the Church announced the formation of four new missions in Eastern Europe, bringing to a total of twelve those in the former Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc. I remember praying in the fifties—and sixties and seventies and eighties, as our leaders constantly exhorted us to—that God would touch the hearts of the leaders of nations that they might open their doors to the gospel. Like many other Mormons, I prayed without much faith, mainly in hope for something far in the future.

But God did touch hearts and open nations. He was aided by the persistent but peaceful efforts of Solidarity in Poland. He was aided by the faith of those hundreds of thousands of non-violent Christians who, carrying candles instead of guns, marched out of their churches into the streets of East Germany and brought down the government. He was aided by the courage of those Russians who stood before the tanks in Moscow, some to be crushed to death before the coup failed and

Communism dissolved. It is time, I believe, for us to reaffirm our faith in the God who stands for peace and healing, to make a new covenant here in the desert—not for the Church but for ourselves personally. It is time for each of us to take to heart the symbolism—and literal miracle—in the young pair of elders preaching the gospel of peace together last year in Northern England, one the first missionaries called from Russia, a former soldier of the Soviet Union, the other a former cadet at West Point, where he was being trained to fight his enemies, the Soviets. Like those two young men, each of us can become a witness for the covenant of peace, as the prophet Alma taught and as we promise to do at baptism—“at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9).

### BLIND OBEDIENCE

*Mormon loyalty to the United States has required the high price of thousands of nuclear-related deaths.*

I GREW UP as a Mormon patriot in the middle of the twentieth century, our century of accommodation to the United States. I believed the Second World War was righteous, a crusade against evil, and would have fought in it had I been older, I barely missed the Korean War, but enlisted in ROTC and became an Air Force weather officer. I served in a tactical fighter-bomber squadron at George Air Force Base, on the Mojave desert in California just south of the Nevada test site. The squadron was alerted twice for Vietnam in the early sixties, but didn't go into combat until after I had left the service for graduate work at Stanford. In the library there, I read international press sources that began to counter the belief I had in American righteousness, in America's right to power to have its own way in small nations far away.

Then, in 1964, quite suddenly I experienced a dramatic paradigm shift, a sea-change in my inner being. The infamous Tonkin Gulf Incident, in which it was claimed that North Vietnamese gunboats attacked an American ship, was used by President Lyndon Johnson as an excuse to bomb Hanoi and as the basis for getting Congressional approval for essentially unlimited powers to escalate the war. The international press sources I read provided convincing evidence that this “incident” was a fabrication by the U.S. government. The lie was later revealed to most other Americans as well; but in the meantime we embarked on a war that killed 58,000 of our own young men and perhaps three million Vietnamese and left a legacy of bitterness and guilt that still brings leanness to our souls.

I had grown up believing that ours is a chosen land, that our Constitution was inspired, and that our presidents did not lie. When I became convinced that president Johnson had lied, with dire results that literally endangered the life and liberty of myself and other Americans, I crossed a line in my soul. I knew that I could no longer give unquestioning support to my country's wars, because those wars could be evil, could endanger my own eternal salvation as well as my life and the lives of others.

For some of us, the “Downwinders,” the costs of our government's lies had already begun by 1964. Above-ground tests were made from 1951 to 1962; many

of us driving along U.S. Highway 91 from Salt Lake to Los Angeles or living in Nevada and Utah saw the early dawn flashes. Sheep died mysteriously. The Atomic Energy Commission assured us there was no danger, but thousands of us, mainly Mormons, already had cancer growing in our bodies. Terry Tempest Williams writes in her essay “The Clan of One-Breasted Women”: “The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons is the same fear I saw in my mothers body [as she died of cancer]. Sheep. Dead sheep. The evidence is buried. . . . Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

It is now well-documented that our government, caught up in the hysterical anti-communism of the late 1940s and 1950s, let the goal of “national security” justify a range of evil means: lying about the amount and dangers of the radioactivity the AEC knew about; illegally interfering with independent efforts to test those dangers and silencing or punishing government employees who “blew the whistle”; intentionally refusing to warn potential victims or to provide medical research and care that they knew would alleviate sickness and death. Mormons—including scientists, doctors, and leaders in the government, and the private sector—have collaborated in this process, mainly through silence, in the face of mounting evidence, in a desire to be supportive of the “divinely directed” country.

Such unquestioning Mormon superpatriotism has been perhaps the most dangerous result of our accommodation to American values. It led most Mormons to acquiesce in the testing and even to accept the government’s cruel refusal of responsibility when the truth came out. Not only have we paid, in Alexander’s words, with “the blood of Mormon youth”—thousands of whom have died in American wars in the past 100 years—but we have paid with thousands of lives of women, men, children and elderly people who have died and will go on dying from cancer. We are paying a price in growing disillusionment and anguish, as individual Mormon Downwinders learn the truth about the betrayal by their government and culture.

Claudia Peterson, a devout Mormon housewife in St. George, lost a daughter to leukemia and a sister and her father-in-law to cancer and was moved by her great pain and loss to rebel against acquiescence and silence. She pored through documents forced out of secrecy by “Freedom or Information” laws and found convincing evidence that the government chose the Nevada test site location, fully aware of the lethal effects of the fallout, so it could plan its test shots when the wind would take that fallout northeast over Utah. The perfectly clear and cynical reason: government officials knew Mormons to be both patriotic and submissive to authority and assumed they would not complain. They were right. But Claudia Peterson has been transformed by her loss and sense of betrayal into an activist against nuclear testing, joining with increasing numbers of Downwinders from both the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. She tells her story, along with dozens of other Utah and Nevada victims, in *American Ground Zero*, a collection of accounts and photographs with a searing and informative introduction.<sup>3</sup>

## PROPHETIC CALLS

*In the last twenty years, Church leaders have repeatedly called us to forsake the idolatry of war, a call the U.S. continues to ignore.*

**O**CCASIONAL BLOWS AGAINST the idolatry of putting loyalty before truth, the United States before God, began to be struck by our Mormon prophets during this period. In the 1960s, those who were opposed on moral grounds to fighting in Vietnam received unexpected support that allowed many to win Conscientious Objector status from previously hostile draft boards when the Church issued a statement allowing conscientious objection to violence as an acceptable Mormon position. But the greatest blow to our accommodation to American ways, a rejection both of its materialism and of its violence and the foundation of a new covenant, was delivered by President Spencer W. Kimball in his stunning prophetic sermon published in June 1976:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus . . . perverting the Savior’s teaching: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). . . . What are we to fear when the Lord is with us? Can we not take the Lord at his word and exercise a particle of faith in him? Our assignment is affirmative; to forsake the things of the world as ends in themselves; to leave off idolatry and press forward in faith; to carry the Gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies.<sup>4</sup>

Five years later, in May 1981, after careful study of the proposed basing of the MX missile in a vast underground system in Utah and Nevada, the First Presidency issued a statement of opposition, recognizing that accommodation to American violence could go too far, could defeat our very purpose in coming into the desert to build God’s kingdom:

Our fathers came to this western area to establish a base from which to carry the gospel of peace to the peoples of the earth. It is ironic, and a denial of the very essence of that gospel, that in this same general area there should be constructed a mammoth weapons system potentially capable of destroying much of civilization.<sup>5</sup>

It is now time to consider not only how the proposed MX missile system, though Mormon opposition helped stop it, would have perverted the gospel of peace we came to the desert to sustain; we must see as well that the “mammoth weapons system” that our country *has* built and still maintains, sustained in part by the testing here in Nevada, also constitutes a “denial of the very essence of the gospel” and that Mormon Christians should oppose it as well.



The First Presidency ended their statement of opposition to the MX bases by saying,

With the most serious concern over the pressing moral question of possible nuclear conflict, we plead with our national leaders to marshal the genius of the nation to find viable alternatives which will secure at an earlier date and with fewer hazards the protection from possible enemy aggression, which is our common concern.

Six months later, in their 1981 Christmas message, the First Presidency became very specific about where our national leaders should look for such alternatives:

To all who seek a resolution to conflict, be it a misunderstanding between individuals or an international difficulty among nations, we commend the counsel of the Prince of Peace, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). This principle of loving one another as Jesus Christ loves us will bring peace to the individual, to the home and beyond, even to the nations and to the world.<sup>6</sup>

However, the new United States president that year was Ronald Reagan, and despite the huge percentage of Mormon votes he garnered and his often expressed appreciation of Mormon values and leaders, he did not follow the First Presidency’s counsel about choosing active love and trust of enemies as a viable alternative to mammoth weapons systems. He proceeded to greatly *increase* our nuclear arsenal and to push development of a Strategic Defense Initiative, both of which were seen by the Soviets as preparation for a first strike, provoking huge spending on their own nuclear arsenal.

Although some credit Reagan’s buildup with pushing the Soviets beyond their economic limits and thus to the collapse of communism in the late eighties, the verdict is far from in, either on what actually brought that collapse or on the long-term effects of the economic chaos and suffering now going on in Eastern Europe, and the effects on our own economy of the \$4 trillion debt the U.S. built up in that arms race. We now see increasing evidence, from former Soviets themselves, of how right the First Presidency was that other methods could have brought peace “at an earlier date and with fewer hazards.”

What is becoming clear is how unnecessary the race was and what the costs to both nations have already been, not just in economic waste but in pollution and in leanness to our souls. In February 1993, former top officials of the United States and the Soviet Union met and discussed a 1983 CIA assessment and a KGB report of the same time and recognized that both had said about the same thing—that the other country was intent on “developing the capability to fight and survive a nuclear war.” The Soviets said they had believed Reagan was pursuing an enormous military buildup that “indicated the United States was serious about overwhelming the Soviet Union.” The “evil empire” rhetoric was taken seriously in Moscow and they responded in kind.<sup>7</sup>

Three articles in the March 1993 *National Geographic* document some of the

ecological and human costs of this arms race, costs for which we bear at least equal responsibility: “Every major river in Russia is polluted, one-fourth of the drinking water is unsafe, and 35 million people live in cities where the air is dangerous to breathe. . . . [As a result] only a quarter of [the children] are in good health . . . [and] life expectancy has fallen in recent years.”<sup>8</sup> Near the huge steel mills, from Poland to Siberia, people live in filth like animals; much of the former empire has been reduced to the level of a hunting and gathering society.

Of course, that other side of the Cold War produced its Downwinders, too. At the Semipalatinsk test site in northeastern Kazakhstan, 500 nuclear devices were detonated between 1949 and 1989, bringing a plague of cancer and birth defects. Across from a photograph of a thirteen-year-old boy who has been blind and disfigured from birth, assistant editor Mike Edwards has written: “Close enough to see the mushroom clouds of early above-ground explosions and to suffer the consequences of both those and lethal ventings from later underground tests, thousands have paid a grisly price in the Cold War.”<sup>9</sup> Carole Gallagher reports that from the U.S. and Soviet and other tests there is now circulating throughout the earths atmosphere and surface waters over twenty-five tons of plutonium, which will remain cancer-inducing and poisonous to life for 250,000 years.

#### IMITATIVE VIOLENCE

*Christ taught that we should not do anything “like unto”  
immoral acts of lust and murder.*

**B**UT THERE HAVE been even more serious costs of our complicity, as Americans, in the madness of Mutual Assured Destruction. Jesus Christ clearly warned us about the negative results of imitative violence to our bodies, but also to our *souls*, that would come from the false idea that force can defeat force. In the extremity of his own danger, Jesus rejected Peter’s attempt to defend him with the sword, instead healing his enemy’s ear and then stating a practical reason for the non-violent ethic: “*All* they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matt. 26:52, emphasis added). Christ calls his disciples to rise above this natural law. In the Sermon on the Mount, he simply makes a pure ethical *demand*: “Resist not evil” (Matt. 5:39). His apostle, Paul, adds a positive pragmatic purpose to the ethic: “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

Christ calls us to love our enemies and overcome them with good—by taking the gospel to them, as President Kimball taught, not only with missionaries, but with patient, intelligent diplomacy, preventive conflict resolution, and Christian service. Christ also teaches the *moral* costs of our violent inclinations, why our souls are in danger if we ignore his demand. In Matthew 5:27–28 (NRSV), he defines what might be called “thought sin”: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” This could well be paraphrased, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall not commit murder’; but I say to you that everyone who looks on a person to murder him has already committed murder in his heart.” Through Joseph Smith, Christ commanded us, “Thou shall not

... kill, nor do anything like unto it” (D&C 59:6).

Though absolute non-violence may not be clearly required by these words from Christ, I believe opposition to nuclear deterrence is required. Christ’s new ethical standards in the Sermon on the Mount and in revelation given to modern prophets imply that planning and organizing to kill millions of innocent citizens with nuclear missiles may be the same as actually doing it. It may be the ultimate dehumanization, targeting for destruction whole cities of people whom we will not face, and we who support such targeting with our taxes and our silence may be guilty of “thought sin” and of something “like unto” murder.

From 1959 to 1961 I was stationed as a weather officer at George AFB, about 150 miles southwest of the Nevada test site. Some of my forecasts may have been used to assess favorable weather and wind conditions so that fallout from tests would go northeast to Utah. A pilot in my fighter-bomber squadron, a member of my elders quorum, regularly went on rotation to Turkey, where he was kept in constant readiness to carry nuclear bombs to targets in Russia. He later told me how he had been prepared to drop a nuclear bomb on a city that would have wiped it out entirely; then he saw a *National Geographic* photo-essay on that city and for the first time saw the faces of the ordinary people—couples and old people and children—he had been prepared to kill. The guilt he felt stayed with him until he left the service.

What is at stake—the violence to ourselves—is captured for me in the 1988 HBO movie *Amazing Grace and Chuck*, starring Gregory Peck and Jamie Leigh Curtis. The main story is a moving, though somewhat sentimental and unrealistic, account of a star little league pitcher in a small town in Montana who decides the nuclear arms race is so wrong that he demonstrates his opposition by refusing to play baseball. Chuck’s obscure act, reported in a local newspaper and picked up nationally, comes to the attention of a player for the Boston Celtics named Amazing Grace, who with some friends joins Chuck in the protest. They are able to spread the boycott to athletes world-wide, provoking intensified arms reduction efforts from both U.S. and Soviet leaders—which in turn leads to the assassination of Amazing Grace by U.S. arms merchants.

In response, Chuck announces he will stop speaking until the nuclear weapons are gone, and children all over the world gradually become silent, joining Chuck in what becomes a successful effort to stop the nuclear arms race—apparently because even government leaders have grandchildren. It’s not clear whether the message is that children, or silence—or perhaps sports—has more power than nuclear arms and those who profit from them.

But for me the most powerful scene occurs early in the film, when Chuck’s father, an Air Force officer at the nearby nuclear missile site in Montana, takes a visiting Congressman on a tour down into one of the launch rooms—and takes Chuck along. Chuck notices that the two officers at the control board both carry guns, and when he gets outside, he asks his father why. He is told that if one officer hesitates when an order to launch comes (which requires them both to act), the other must force him, under the threat of killing him. Chuck immediately perceives what the grown-ups in the film—and most Americans, including Mormons—seem unable to see: that something that requires such constraint against the possible demands of



conscience is inherently evil and must be opposed by whatever non-violent means are available. Chuck refuses to play baseball any more—and later to speak any more. He sees, as a little child, what Terry Tempest Williams saw as she watched the women in her family, including her mother, die of cancer: “The price of obedience has become too high.”

## RENOUNCING WAR

*The tradition of Mormon literature contains  
many examples of a non-violent ethic.*

**B**ESIDES PROPHETS, OTHER Mormon writers like Williams have called us to an ethic of non-violence, even of renouncing our accommodation to American evils, including thought sin. Clinton Larson, Emma Lou Thayne, Marden Clark, Bruce Jorgensen, Susan Howe, and Dennis Clark are poets who have powerfully described our violence, its costs, and some alternatives. They are part of our non-violent Mormon heritage, which must be constantly reclaimed.

Writers of fiction have also been part of this heritage. One of our first powerful modern writers, Maurine Whipple, wrote the Houghton Mifflin Literary Prize novel for 1941, *The Giant Joshua*, which tells of the Mormon pioneer settling of the Dixie Mission—the attempt to make the desert just northeast of the Nevada test site blossom with, not roses at first, but cotton. The story is told by Clory, a third wife in polygamy, who at one point, with her friend Pal, has decided to leave the community. Pal’s husband finds out and comes to Clory, telling her he’s made a bargain with his wife that if he could show her one beautiful thing in all the desert she’d stay. He then takes the two young wives on horseback at dawn up over Steamboat Mountain. They are led by Tutsegabbett, a chief of the Shoshoni Nation, perhaps an ancestor of Bill Rossi, the Shoshoni who now provides permission forms for protesters to cross into the Nevada test site, land the Shoshoni Nation still claims as its own, land they believe was never legally obtained by the U.S. government.

On the way Chief Tutsegabbett tells Pal and Clory the legend of Neab and Nannoo, two lovers who, with Neab’s father, have tried to stop their people from burying the sick and older Indians in caves to die. The girl becomes extremely ill and is taken to be left in a cave, despite her lover’s pleas. Neab tells his people that what they are doing is evil and will cause God to take away the rain, but he will go into the cave with his dying friend and intercede for them:

His people begged him to come out, but when the women rolled the boulder back into place, Neab was there to keep Nannoo company. . . . Tutsegabbett pulled up his pony and waited for the others to catch up with him. . . . [He] spread wide his arms.

“[God], pleased with his servant, set His footprint before the cave of Neab to show his stubborn people the way.”

The Indian pony took another dainty step or two. . . . They lined up at the very lip of a huge basin scooped out in the solid rock.

“*See-coe!*” cried Tutsegabbett.

Clory sucked in her breath, transfixed in amazement and delight. . . .

There before them, carpeting the depression, were thousands of fairy bells with lavender hearts, tossing their lovely heads. Flowers wilting at a touch, so delicate as to be almost other-earthly there among the black rocks.

Sego lilies! Sown as thickly as a desert sky with stars. Poised like heavenly butterflies there on the grim lava surface as if they needed no roots, would float upward at a breath. . . .

[Tutsegabbett continued,] “. . . The [Shoshonis] resolved never to fight on a battlefield where sego lilies grew: thus the sego lily became an emblem of peace. . . .”

[God’s] mighty footstep before the cave of Neab. Neab, who did not run away.<sup>10</sup>

Nearly fifty years after Whipple’s *Giant Joshua*, Orson Scott Card won the World Fantasy Award for the first part of a series of novels based on the life of Joseph Smith, called the *Tales of Alvin Maker*. At the end of the first novel, *Seventh Son*, a drunken, one-eyed Native American, a “Red” in the common language of this alternate frontier America, suddenly appears in Alvin’s room. Alvin touches and heals him of something more than his drunkenness or physical blindness, and he appears in the second volume, *The Red Prophet*, as an absolute pacifist Christ-figure named Ta-Kumsaw. He gathers his people in a huge town near Alvin’s home, preaching the gospel of peace as the only resolution to the growing struggle with the invading “Whites.”

That struggle culminates in what is for me one of the most unusual and moving scenes in any literature—an example of the “third way” of responding to violence that increasing numbers of Christian peace activists are advocating as the one taught by Christ, “neither flight nor fight,” but loving, non-violent confrontation. The scene is modeled directly on one of the greatest scenes in history—in the Book of Mormon, which tells of a group of Lamanites who are converted by Ammon and decide as a result to refuse any more violence, bury their weapons, and stand forth to be killed. This scene is recreated in a way that brings home to Mormons its emotional and ethical power and relevance to modern life, as the Whites, led by Alvin’s father (he has been tricked by Whites to believe the Reds have killed Alvin and has infected his neighbors and others with the revenge spirit) massacre the Reds in a scene common in American history. But there is a profound difference, as the Red Prophet stands forth with his people in a way that absorbs the violence and ultimately stops it, creating a story that testifies to the unique healing power of such redemptive love—and also to its enormous cost.

At times the Book of Mormon shows people living a lower law of defensive war (such as the Nephites under General Mormon) and being helped in their wars by God. At other times Book of Mormon prophets clearly state the higher non-violent ethic and make clear it is higher. In compiling the Book of Mormon, Mormon, though a warrior himself, includes the account of the people of the Lamanites who

felt called by their conversion to Christ to refuse further violence, even at the sacrifice of their lives. He then writes, in his usual manner of teaching a lesson, “Thus we see that when these Lamanites were brought to know the truth they were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin” (Alma 24:19). Later Mormon reports Ammon’s judgment that these people had reached an ethical level superior to his own Nephites—who, of course, were soon to choose the lower ethic of defensive war, which, even though they were helped by the Lord, did not bring peace and was followed soon by their decline:

For behold, [these Lamanites] had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of an enemy; and they have buried their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their love towards their brethren. And now behold I say unto you, has there been so great love in all the land? Behold I say unto you. Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites. (Alma 25:32, 33)

In retelling this story, Card adds a dimension to his Book of Mormon source that makes his version particularly poignant for modern Mormon whites. Card intuitively connects the covenant relationship to the land that God desires of us and without which we destroy the land and ourselves and finally our right to the land. The Whites, like the attacking Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, begin to sicken of their carnage and are moved to regret and repentance by the courageous non-violence of those they are killing. Then the Red Prophet stands forth on the face of the stream and calls to his people, both the dead and the living: “Come to me . . . All my people, all who died—Come home, says the land.” And those who are dead, “at the Prophet’s words, these bodies seemed to shudder, to crumble, they collapsed and sank into the grass of the meadow. It took perhaps a minute, and they were gone, the grass springing up lush and green.” Those who are living walk across the water and join the Prophet on the other side of the “Mizzipy River.”

But first the Red Prophet calls the repentant Whites to him, all of whose hands and forearms have begun to drip blood:

“Do you want your hands to be clean of the blood of my people?” asked the Prophet. He wasn’t shouting anymore, but they all heard him, every word. And yes, yes, they wanted their hands to be clean.

“Then go home and tell this story to your wives and children, to your neighbors, to your friends. Tell the whole story. Leave nothing out. Don’t say that someone fooled you—you all knew when you fired on people who had no weapons that what you did was murder. No matter whether you thought some of us might have committed some crime. When you shot at babies in their mothers’ arms, little children, old men and women, you were murdering us because we were Red. So tell the story as it happened, and if you tell it true, your hands will be clean. . . . If some stranger comes along, and you don’t tell him the whole story before you sleep, then the blood will come back on your hands, and stay there until you do tell him. That’s how it will be for the rest of your lives. . . . And if you ever, for any reason, kill

another human being, then your hands and face will drip with blood forever, even in the grave. . . . My people, all who still believe in me, we'll go west of the Mizzipy. When you tell your story, tell the White men this— that west of the Mizzipy is Red man's land. Don't come there. The land can't bear the touch of a White man's foot. You breathe out death; your touch is poison; your words are lies; the living land won't have you."<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this is only Card writing a fantasy—or is it? The White man did, of course, cross the Mississippi and take the land from the Red man—with lies, violence, and the breaking of treaties like the one with the Shoshoni here in Nevada. We are in Nevada for a “Mormon Peace Gathering” because American whites have literally poisoned the land and breathed out death, at the Nevada test site and the Tooele Army Depot and Dugway Proving Ground and the Montana missile sites. Perhaps if some prophet had been able to force us to tell and retell the stories of our massacres, how we massacred little children, old men and women at Wounded Knee and at Bear River and Dresden and Hiroshima and Mountain Meadows and hundreds of other places, how we are right now continuing to build and test missiles that will fire on innocent people who have no weapons—what the Red Prophet calls murder and Christ says at least is like unto it. Perhaps if that had happened and we had thus perforce become speakers for the dead, we could have stopped. But we are left with the awful burden of choice (our souls, not our bodies, at stake) as to whether we will tell those stories or be silent.

Card, like the modern prophets and all our best poets and Maurine Whipple, has shown us a way and called us with his story-telling back to a new covenant with the land we have killed, so that it and we can live again and live in peace. Alvin, Card's recreation of the Prophet Joseph Smith, reflects as he watches the Red Prophet leave the battlefield:

[The battle] was about White men, and their worthiness to have this land. They might think they won, they might think the Red man slunk away or bowed his head in defeat, but in fact it was the White man who lost, because when Ta-Kumsaw paddled down . . . to the Mizzipy . . . he was taking the land with him, the greensong; what the White man had won with so much blood and dishonesty was not the living land of the Red man, but the corpse of that land. It was decay that the White man won. It would turn to dust in his hands, Alvin knew it.<sup>12</sup>

We have broken a covenant with the God of the land, with the land itself, and with the original inhabitants of the land. Throughout the scriptures the pattern is clear; the land is a necessary part of our covenant-making with the Lord, by which alone salvation comes, and we cannot pollute the land without polluting our souls and inviting natural forces to sweep us off the face of the land.

## WHAT COVENANT?

*The desert reminds us of many who have made covenants  
with and received salvation from the Prince of Peace.*

**W**HAT CAN WE do? What new covenant will God receive in the desert? Christ's call is clear, and one we now, perhaps for the first time in 100 years, can have the security and courage as Mormons to obey fully. The call is to come out of Babylon, which includes the United States, and approach Zion, which is wherever in the world we create it. In the book of Revelation, Christ commands, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4). In the Doctrine and Covenants, he invites us to "renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their [parents], and the hearts of the [parents] to the children" (D&C 98:16). Then a time will come, Christ promises, when "there shall be gathered [to Zion] out of every nation; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another" (D&C 45:69). After 100 years of perhaps necessary detour, it is time to talk about how we can return to that goal.

The desert has always been a place for making covenants and creating a new people. Both Moses and Brigham Young recognized the attraction of the desert, a place of isolation and trial, as the best place to make Saints. It is where many—Enoch, Lehi, John the Baptist, Christ, Spencer W. Kimball—have gone to find and renew and rededicate themselves.

Not far from where this Mormon Peace Gathering is being held is the Las Vegas Temple, with six spires and the angel Moroni facing east in expectation of Christ's coming. There thousands of Latter-day Saints, including some who are here at the Gathering, regularly covenant to obey God above all, to have no material or political idols, and to consecrate everything to building Christ's kingdom on earth. Surrounding Las Vegas and extending out through the test site is the desert, a place that reminds us constantly of the fragile web of life and of how dependent we are on the gifts of God to sustain us. Jesus went into the desert to fast, and fasting in the desert doubles our sense of dependency and need that may open us each to a new covenant of peace:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. ... I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:31, 33)

God has told us what kind of fast he requires of us and what blessings will follow a righteous fast and a new covenant of peace in the land and with the land. The desert will blossom, we shall be able to rebuild the waste places, to repair the wounds we have made in the land, between peoples, in our own souls, to become the restorers of proper paths to dwell in. Listen to the word of the Lord to Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou



seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shalt thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward. Then shall thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say. Here I am. . . . And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. (Isa. 58: 6–12)

This is the covenant God will receive in this lean and desert place. If we come fasting, humble, fragile, peaceful, he can take away the leanness in our souls. He can help us build up the old waste places, the mines and test caves and missile silos where we have violated our Mother earth. We can raise up the foundation of many generations of our children, living in peace with each other and the land. We can repair the breaches between peoples and nations, between races and sexes, between ourselves and the environment. We can be the restorer of paths to dwell in and find at the end of them the footstep of our God, not the cave of death in the desert but the field of sego lilies.

We have dwelt too long in the wrong paths; for nearly 100 years we have accommodated Christ's ways to America's ways. May God help us to heed President Kimball's call to "leave off idolatry," to end our worship of gods of steel and "press forward in faith," in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace.

The organizers of this Mormon Peace Gathering chose four symbols from our Mormon Christian heritage for us to contemplate during our meditation and worship together and have placed them in a handcart here on the stand before us—stone, bread, rose, and cross.

Jesus Christ is the stone. He is the stone rejected by the builders of our nation, who is to become the chief cornerstone of the Kingdom and of each of our lives as we repent and forgive.

Jesus Christ is the bread. He is the bread of life that we eat each Sabbath when we renew our covenants of peace and that we nourish ourselves with when we study and hearken to his words, given in the scriptures and to the prophets.

Jesus Christ is the rose. He is the Rose of Sharon, blooming in the desert, and the blood-red rose who suffered on the witness tree for our sins.

Jesus Christ is the cross. He is the burden, the easy but heavy burden we must pick up and carry. As the Book of Mormon prophet taught, we are called to "view his death and suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world" (Jacob 1:8).

Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. The first Mormon Peace Gathering and the many I hope will take place in the future are intended to help us who claim to be his followers, members of his Church, find ways, humbly and Peaceably, to follow him better.

## NOTES

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3. Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), see quotes from Claudia Boshell Peterson, 114–17
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