

A Study of Covenant

Scripture came into being as an expression of the relationship between God and His people, a relationship that the Bible typically portrays in terms of a covenant.

Every issue in the Bible ends up somehow finding its meaning within the ebb and flow of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His people; in this sense, "*covenant* is the air that Scripture breathes," supplying the framework for understanding all parts of the Old and New Testaments. So...

What is a covenant?

God's Word has much to say about the concept of *covenant*—much more, in fact, than a casual reading would suggest; in order to avoid missing the Bible's many references to this fascinating subject, it's important to know what a covenant is, to discover its purpose, and to learn to recognize its features.

A covenant itself was composed of at least seven parts. (Although a covenant could be between two parties of equal authority, for the sake of time and our purpose here, we're going to consider it primarily from the viewpoint of king and subject(s). Furthermore, although the order I'm using here is the normal order, these parts of a covenant didn't necessarily have to be accomplished in this order.)

1. The Historical Prologue: this was when the king identified himself and related the history of his relationship with the subjects and their ancestors.

As God began preparing the Israelites for their covenant with Him, He said to Moses, "*Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you." [And] thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever..."*" (Exo. 3:14-15). Later...

When God began to narrate The Ten Commandments, He identified Himself again by saying, "*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt*" (Exo. 20:2).

2. The Granting of a Province: this was when the king assigned territory to his subject(s).

Back to Exodus 3, after God had identified Himself, He went on to say, "*I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites ..., to a land flowing with milk and honey*" (Exo. 3:17), just as He had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact...

Within the very narrative of The Ten Commandments God reaffirmed this when He said to "*Honor your father and mother that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you*" (Exo. 20:12).

3. The Stipulations: this was when the king laid down the conditions which must be met by his subject(s). Of course, with reference to the Old Testament that we've been using to illustrate our points here, these stipulations were The Ten Commandments and all the ceremonial regulations found from Exodus through Deuteronomy.
4. The Sanctions: this was when the king declared the blessings which would follow the keeping of the covenant and the cursings which would follow the breaking of the covenant.

In Joshua 8:34 we're told that Joshua "*read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.*"

These blessings are found in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, while the cursings are found in Deuteronomy 28:15-68, all of which, by the way, were fulfilled in Jerusalem's AD 70 destruction.

5. The Oath with Witnesses: this was when the king and/or his subjects swore loyalty to the terms of the covenant in the presence of witnesses who heard the terms *and* enforced its sanctions.

One of the main components of this oath is that the subject(s) would have no other Lord, which, of course, fits the first commandment: "*You shall have no other gods before Me*" (Deu. 5:7).

Both before and after Moses repeated the commandments and ceremonial regulations, he said, "*I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life...*" (Deu. 4:26 & 30:19).

6. The Sign: this was when a mark was provided to verify the existence of the covenant.

When we think about this, the rainbow usually comes to mind; but, perhaps more often than not, these signs or marks of covenant were usually found on the body, like circumcision.

In Ezekiel 9:4-6 we find a passage about how God's faithful people were saved from destruction by a mark on their foreheads: Ezekiel speaks of six men, one of whom was clothed in white linen; to this man God said, "*Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it.*" To the others He said, "*Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary.*"

7. The Documentation: this is when a permanent record of the agreement was provided and a public reading of it was required at periodic intervals. In fact...

According to one historian, a covenant wasn't generally even considered in existence and binding until it was written, sealed, and delivered to the king.

Although bits and pieces of the lengthy record of the Law was read from time to time (such as in the synagogues in the latter history of the Jews), the entirety of the Law was to be read at least once every seven years: Deuteronomy 31:10-11 have Moses saying, "*At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time ... when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel.*"

The covenant ceremony, in which both partners participated in order to ratify the agreement, might include any and/or all of the following: a sacrifice, a meal, and a sharing of weapons and/or clothing.

As regards a sacrifice, the covenant between God and the Israelites involved the killing of a lamb and cutting it into pieces (as in the case of God and Abraham); by doing such, the Israelites were saying, "God do so to me, and more so also, if I violate the terms of our covenant."

As regards a meal, the Israelites ate the lamb they sacrificed, known as the Passover feast. And...

As regards the exchange of clothing and weapons, God promised numerous times that He would care for and defend the Israelites (cf. Eze. 16:8-14 & Isa. 31:5) as long as they kept their part of the covenant, of course (cf. David & Jonathan in 1 Sam. 18:1-4, God & Eliakim in Isa. 22:21, and Boaz & Ruth in Ruth 3:9—covenant of marriage). Next...

What is some covenant language to help us spot covenant-related texts?

The essence of the covenant and basis for all relationships between God and Israel was this statement: "*I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*"

Israel acknowledged God as their great King, and she became His servant, and that agreement guaranteed God's provision for and protection over Israel, requiring obedience and faithfulness from the nation toward its Lord.

The covenant formula which defines this relationship between God the great King and His servant Israel can be found in various forms in numerous passages (Gen. 17:7, Exo. 29:45, Lev. 26:12, 45, Deu. 29:10-13, Isa. 51:16, Jer. 24:7, 30:22, 31:33, 32:38, Heb. 11:16, & 1 Pet. 2:9-10); so remember, whenever the phrase "*I will be their God*" appears in any of its variations, the subject under consideration relates to the covenant.

The number "7" is the number of covenant or the number that represents covenant ideas.

The Hebrew word for "swear" (which is what a covenant is—an oath) literally translated means "to seven oneself"; this means that a covenant oath could not be taken without using the number "7."

Seventy weeks or seventy "7s" of curses were determined against Israel for breaking the covenant (Dan. 9:11 & 24), and this was fulfilled in AD 70.

A study of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy reveal that "7" is the primary number used in the instructions for sacrifices, feast days, cleansing rituals, and other ceremonies associated with the giving of the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

1. The seventh day was the Sabbath (Exo. 31:15).
2. Hebrew servants were freed in the seventh year (Exo. 21:2).
3. Blood & oil were sprinkled seven times over various objects for purification (Lev. 4:6, et al.).
4. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted seven days, and the seventh was a Sabbath (Lev. 23:7-8).
5. Seven weeks or seven "7s" after the offering of firstfruits was the Feast of Pentecost (Lev. 23:15-16).
6. On the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets; on the tenth day of the seventh month was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:24-25); and on the fifteenth day of the seventh month was a holy meeting that lasted seven days (Lev. 23:24-36).
7. Every seventh year the land was to rest (Lev. 25:4).

Because God through Moses called the "heaven(s) and earth" as witnesses, this phrase came to stand for or symbolize the covenant, the very world of the Jews; this means that when God spoke of destroying these witnesses due to Israel's rebellion against the covenant, He was declaring that His relationship with Israel, the covenant, would be dissolved, bringing on the promised curses.

When saddened by the sin of His people, God spoke to these witnesses, saying, "*Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! ... I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me*" (Isa. 1:2). And...

When speaking of the destruction of the old covenant and the creation of a new covenant, God said, "*As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me, so shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that ... all flesh [i.e. not just Jews] shall come to worship before Me" And they shall ... look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me*" (Isa. 66:22-24, cf. Isa. 65:17); in other words, the Jews' world as they knew it would cease to exist, and another would be created.

This information helps us to understand passages like Matthew 5:18 where Jesus indicated that the heavens and earth would not pass away until every jot and tittle of the Law was fulfilled and Matthew 24:35 where, when speaking about the demise of Jerusalem and its temple—the very representations of the Old Testament, Jesus said that heaven and earth [i.e., the old covenant] would pass away, but His words [i.e., the new covenant, the new heaven and earth of Isaiah] would not pass away.

When the Bible speaks of someone "knowing the Lord" or the Lord knowing someone, this is covenant language, indicating that such a one is faithful to the covenant meaning in turn that he is righteous (cf. 1 Sam. 2:12, Jer. 22:15-16, Hos. 2:20, & Luke 13:22-30). This leads us to the idea that...

The phrase to "walk before, with, or after the Lord" is also covenant language referring to one's faithfulness in covenant-keeping (Deu. 11:22-23, cf. Deu. 13:4, 1 Kgs. 8:23, & Rev. 3:4).

The word "love" also has covenant overtones, overtones that are not emotional in nature, by the way.

The Hebrew word *hesed* primarily deals with God's love toward his covenant-subjects as when David asked the Lord to show love based on the covenant relationship between them; in fact, in Psalm 18 David's thanksgiving for God's love (v. 50) was preceded by a statements describing God's covenant relationship with him (vv. 16-49).

The Hebrew word *ahab* primarily deals with the covenant-subjects' love towards God as in Deuteronomy 7:9 when Moses said, "*Know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy ... with those who love Him and keep His commandments,*" reminding us of Jesus' saying, "*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*" (John 14:15)? On the other hand...

To "hate" is either to refuse loyalty and obedience or to refuse to extend a covenant relationship to; for example, the Lord is said to "hate" Esau (Mal. 1:3 & Rom. 9:13), not in the sense of emotionally despising him, but in the sense that He did not extend the covenant to him—it went rather to his brother, Jacob, with whom God affirmed His covenant. Let's end this study with this question...

What was the old covenant lawsuit by God against Israel?

When violations of the covenant between the Lord and Israel occurred, it was the prophet who served as a lawyer or spokesman for God the Plaintiff in bringing formal charges against the client nation; these charges occur in several passages and have been called by some "the covenant lawsuit." (Some examples are found in Deu. 32, Isa. 1, Jer. 2 & 34, Hos. 4 & 5, and Mic. 6.)

The nation was called by the Lord to account for its sins before the covenant witnesses such as mountains (Mic. 6:2), heaven (Deu. 32:1, Isa. 12, & Jer. 2:12), earth (Deu. 32:1, Isa. 1:2, & Mic. 6:2), and even the sons of Israel themselves (Hos. 4:1). (Why the sons? Because they made themselves witnesses in Joshua 24:22.) Because the covenant was legally binding, and the witnesses attested to its violation, Israel had no defense, and the prophets pronounced judgment (cf. Isa. 1:1-4 & 11-17).

Hosea said to the offending nation, "*Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, for the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land*" (4:1). What land? The territory He had given them.

God's case was built upon Israel's transgressions, defined in covenant terms as lack of faithfulness, lack of loyalty, and lack of knowing the Lord (v. 1).

Specifically, the violations were swearing empty oaths (4:2 & 10:4), lying (4:2 & 7:3), murder (4:2 & 6:9), theft (4:2 & 7:1), and adultery (4:2 & 7:4), all offenses against the ten base commandments of the covenant text (Deu. 5:1-21).

While the cutting of a covenant is thought of as a creation (as in Isa. 66), its disavowing was often described as a reversal of creation: Hosea said that because of Israel's broken covenant and the Lord's consequent rejection of them, "*the land mourns, and everyone who lives in it languishes along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky; also the fish of the sea disappear*" (4:3).

Jeremiah was even more specific.

As a result of the rebellion of Israel, he saw the earth go into mourning and revert to a state of formlessness and void (4:23 & 27-28) as it was before the original (literal) creation of Genesis 1:2 (cf. Rom. 8:19-23). In addition...

The heavens no longer have light (4:23 & 28), man does not exist (v. 25), the birds have disappeared (v. 25), the earth no longer brings forth vegetation (v. 26), and the cities, evidence of civilization, have been destroyed before the "*fierce anger*" of the Lord (vv. 26 & 29).

Eventually the prophets saw the covenant as irrevocably broken; only a small portion (a remnant) of the people were faithful to God. As a result of the wholesale rebellion of God's covenant people, the Lord ran out of patience and judgment was inevitable: the nation would be invaded, killed, and/or taken captive to be resettled in other lands; as Micah put it, the "*wounds are incurable*" (1:9).

In the view of the prophets, the only possible remedy for Israel's dilemma was the cutting of a new covenant with the small minority (the 144,000 of Revelation) who remained faithful to the Lord.

This new covenant was to come in the form of a person—the Servant-Messiah; in the tradition of Moses and David, He would mediate this new covenant of peace and blessing between God and Israel (Isa. 42:1-3 & 6-7).

It was this covenant that Isaiah longed for, understanding that the Mosaic covenant had been violated to the extent that there was no hope of restoration under it; only the curses could be anticipated (cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

This new covenant was not to be made with the entire nation of Israel—only the few (cf. Mat. 7:13-14) who sought the Lord with their whole heart (as proven through a great tribulation, Mat. 24:21) would become the firstfruits of this covenant (cf. Jas. 1:18 & Rev. 14:4)

This new covenant would ensure that God's people would survive and not be entirely cut off; the nation would still have a future, though in a spiritual sense as always intended (Jer. 33:7-9).