



Understanding Agreements In The Old Testament

By

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This Bible study was first presented more than 20 years ago and is reproduced here in its original form.

Binding Agreements

The New International Version translates the Greek word *diatheke* as “covenant.” The same word in Hebrew is *berith*. It translates as “covenant,” “treaty,” “agreement,” “compact,” or “alliance.” Some etymologists believe the Hebrew came from a root word that meant “to bind.” A covenant would be that which binds together the parties involved. The English definition of “covenant” is “a binding agreement.”

Biblical Covenants

We find two basic kinds of covenants in the Bible: those between people and between God and people.

The earliest idea of a covenant was an agreement of a solemn and binding force. One early example was blood-brotherhood. Two men became brothers by drinking each other’s blood. It meant that one of the men was adopted into the clan of the other man. That included a new relationship with the god of that clan. The drinking of each other’s blood as part of the covenant grew into drinking together the blood of a sacrifice, sprinkling it on the covenant parties, eating together the sacrificial meal, etc. That’s important to remember as we follow the usage of water into the New Testament writings.

We discover some basic tenants of covenants in the Old Testament.

- The parties agreed on a basic statement.
- “There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’—between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm, just as we did not molest you but always treated you well and sent you away in peace.” Gen. 26:28-29
- Each party made an oath to observe the terms.
- “Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other.” Gen. 26:31
- Each party invoked a curse in case they disregarded the agreement.
- “Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol—a thing detestable to the Lord...Cursed is the man who dishonors his father or his mother...Cursed is the man who moves his neighbor’s boundary stone...Cursed is the man who leads the blind astray on the road...Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow...Cursed is the man who sleeps with his father’s wife...Cursed is the man who has sexual relations with any animal...Cursed is the man who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother...Cursed is the man who sleeps with his mother-in-law...Cursed is the man who kills his neighbor secretly...Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person...Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out. Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” Deut. 27:15-26
- The parties formally ratified the covenant by a solemn external act.

- “He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal.” Genesis 31:54

Covenants were sometimes between individuals, sometimes between tribes or nations. Covenants between tribes and nations were also known as treaties or alliances.

“So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a treaty.” Gen. 21:27

“Come now, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.” Gen. 31:44

Kings had covenants with their subjects.

“Good, said David. I will make an agreement with you. But I demand one thing of you; Do not come into my presence unless you bring Michal daughter of Saul when you come to see me.” 2 Sam. 3:13

“The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves.” Jer. 34:8

Other examples of individual covenants are: 2 Kings 11:4; Job 31:1 and 41:4; Hosea 10:4; 1 Samuel 18:3, 20:8 and 23:18; Psalm 55:20; and Malachi 2:14.

The technical phrase for making a covenant was *karath berith* (“to cut a covenant”). It was used in reference to the cutting of animals in pieces in a formal ceremony of ratification.

Most of the covenants in the Bible are between God and people. Some are “unconditional” (fulfillment depends only upon the faithfulness of God and there is no question about that). Others are “conditional” (fulfillment depends on both parties faithfully carrying out the terms of the agreement).

This is a list of the major covenants scholars have found in the Bible. They are the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, the Edenic Covenant, the Adamic Covenant, the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Circumcision Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Palestinian Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant.

Covenant of Redemption

God promised eternal life before the world began. "...a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time." (Titus 1:2) This may be the same covenant written about in Hebrews 13:20: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep."

Covenant of Works

Some Bible students believe God made a covenant with Adam before he fell into sin. They say that God promised Adam eternal life in exchange for his good works. I don't agree with this one. I can't find any support for the idea that Adam had to "earn" eternal life. God "gave" mankind the gift of eternal life. Adam didn't have to do anything to receive eternal life. God created him with it. However, Adam did have to obey to "keep" what he had. "And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" (Gen. 2: 16-17) As we know, Adam did eat from the forbidden tree and did die physically. Adam's soul lives eternally as do all human souls, but he would not have had eternal life if God had intervened and saved him."

Covenant of Grace

Some scholars (who call themselves Covenant Theologians) believe in only two covenants: the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. The Grace Covenant is where God is supposed to have made an agreement with the elect to provide them eternal salvation on the basis of grace. The problem with this belief is that it lumps everything that happened after Adam's fall into sin under the Covenant of Grace. That means everything in the Bible except for Genesis chapters 1 and 2! "Such classification blurs the distinctions between the various covenants which God has made and thus results in confusion of God's dispensational purposes." (Dr. Charles Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*)

The Edenic Covenant

This is about the relationship between God and Adam prior to his fall into sin. Some call it the "rule of life" for man under the Dispensation of Innocence. The rules included replenishing the earth with a new order, subduing the earth for human uses, having dominion over the animals, eating herbs and fruits, tilling and keeping the garden, and abstaining from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The penalty for disobedience was death.

The Adamic Covenant

This is supposed to be the Divine arrangement which conditions man's life after the fall. The Scriptural support is given as Genesis 3:14-19. It includes the curse upon the serpent, the promise of the Redeemer, the changed state of the woman, the curse on the earth, the sorrow of life, toilsome labor, and physical death. Though the Bible does not call this a covenant, God did make promises and statements of how things would be for mankind.

The Noahic Covenant

We come to the first Bible verse that uses the word "covenant" (*berith*). It's Genesis 9:9-17: "I now establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants after you...I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth..."This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth. So God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established

between me and all life on the earth.” This is an unconditional covenant. God promises that He will never destroy the earth with a flood.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Covenant God made with Abraham is the cornerstone of all God’s blessings to the people of earth. It began when God called out Abram, one of Terah’s sons, to leave his country, his people and his father’s household and go to a new land that God would show him. God’s promises to Abram are unconditional. They begin in Gen. 12:2-3:

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

The covenant continues in Gen. 13:14-16 and 15:5-18:

“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted... Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be...On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.’”

Abraham's Children

It's important to note that God passed between the sacrificial pieces alone. Abram fell into a deep sleep. God told him about a time when Abram's descendants would be enslaved four hundred years and then be freed. After saying that, God made the covenant alone: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." One other important note, God made this covenant with Abram 24 years before he was circumcised and 430 years before God gave the Law to Moses and Israel. Abram was technically a gentile and not under Law at the time God made the covenant with him. God's blessings are for all people! That's the wonderful message of the Gospel of the Grace of God.

"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." Gal. 3:6-9

Today's Christians are Abraham's children. We are saved in the same way Abraham was. We believe God and are justified "apart from works." J.C. O'Hair comments on this verse.

“What people were seen when the gospel was preached to Abram 24 years before he was circumcised, and 430 years before the law was added to the gospel (Galatians 3:19)? The heathen (Gentiles) of Paul’s day. What was seen? That the uncircumcised heathen would be declared righteous without circumcision, without the law, without any religious observances; just as Abraham was, by faith without works.”

”The Unsearchable Riches of Christ”

We are not Abraham’s children in the sense of becoming heirs to the specific covenant blessing about promised land. None of us can lay claim to property in Israel. That is something God will fulfill in the future millennial kingdom when Christ rules from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem.

The Circumcision Covenant

God appeared to Abram again about 15 years after establishing the covenant with him. Abram was 99 years old. God gave Abram the Covenant of Circumcision and changed his name to “Abraham.” The name meant “father of many nations.” God confirmed His promise of the land of Canaan and added the rite of circumcision to all Abraham’s male descendants. God declared that any uncircumcised man would be cut off from God’s people. Here are some portions of the covenant necessary to our understanding. You will find the entire covenant in Genesis 17.

“When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase

your numbers ... this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generation to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God ... you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised.”

“My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant ... On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, and circumcised them, as God told him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was

circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen; Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him."

This covenant was given to Abraham and Paul did say we are Abraham's children. So, do we need to obey it? NO! This "conditional" covenant deals with God's special promise to Israel. How do we know that? The Gospel of circumcision continued from Abraham through Moses through David through the holy prophets through Christ through His apostles. They all held that circumcision was absolutely necessary to keeping the covenant God had made with Abraham. However, one prophet of God did not continue the preaching of the Covenant of circumcision. He was the Apostle Paul.

Look at Acts 15. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" Antioch was in Syria. It was not a part of Israel. The majority of people in the town were gentiles. Jewish believers heard about Paul's ministry to the gentiles there. They went up to Antioch to add their wisdom to Paul's teaching. They told the gentiles that they must be circumcised or they couldn't be saved. That would have been true if the gentiles were under the same Covenant of circumcision the Jews were under, but they weren't. That was something the Jews did not understand at that time. "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see

the apostles and elders about this question.” The Apostle Paul and his partner Barnabas believed this was a point that had to be argued vigorously. They went to Jerusalem and met with the believers, apostles and elders. “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’” This was the crux of the matter. Should gentile believers in Christ have to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses?

The Apostle Peter, who preached the necessity of circumcision to Jews, reminded the congregation that God had given gentiles the Holy Spirit without them ever being circumcised or going through any legal ceremony. After that, Paul and Barnabas told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. James, who seemed to be the spokesman for the Jewish believers at that time, ruled the gentiles did not have to be circumcised or obey the law of Moses, other than abstaining from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. The Jewish believers in Israel would continue to be circumcised and obey the Law, but gentiles were exempt from it. Why? Because gentiles belonged to another gospel: The Gospel of the Grace of God.

Paul gives us more details about this precedent-setting meeting in Galatians 2.

“Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek ... they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.”

This is a remarkable statement in light of the Covenant of circumcision. How could Paul, a mere man, change what God had declared to Abraham thousands of years earlier? Paul could not have done that unless God had given Paul a new declaration. That’s exactly what God did. He gave Paul the message of a new Dispensation. [The word “dispensation” is the Greek word *oikonomian*. It signifies “the management of a household.” Other translations are “stewardship” and “administration.”] Paul explains it in more detail in Ephesians 3.

“Surely you have heard about the administration (*oikonomian*) of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

The Mosaic Covenant

God gave His prophet Moses and the people of Israel a special covenant. It was temporary and conditional. We now refer to it as the Old Covenant because a new one has replaced it. The people of Israel came under a special covenant with God through Abraham hundreds of years before Moses came into the picture. In Exodus 24, we find that God introduced another agreement to the same people. He called Moses to the top of Mount Sinai and gave him the laws God wanted the people to obey. Here’s what happened when Moses came down from the mountain and delivered God’s Law to the people.

“He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the

other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”

The chapters that follow in Exodus contain specific points of the Law.

The writer of Hebrews helps us better understand the Mosaic Covenant and the all-important impact of blood in an agreement between God and humanity. These are excerpts from Hebrews 9 and 10.

“In the case of a will [*diatheke* –“covenant”] it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. [Note that the writer called the Mosaic Covenant the “first” covenant.] When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. [That is an extremely important statement! There is no

forgiveness without the shedding of blood.] It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people, and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. [Again, a very important statement. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away anyone's sins. It is only the blood of Jesus Christ that can cleanse every stain and forgive every trespass against God.] Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifices and offering you did not

desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’ First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them’ (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second. [The writer refers to the first and second covenants here. The first was the Mosaic Covenant. The second is one is the New Covenant.] And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Christ Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

The Mosaic Covenant (also known as the Old Covenant and the First Covenant) had three sections: (1) The Law of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-7, governing the moral life of Israel in relation to the righteous will of God, (2) The Judgments, Exodus 21:1-24:11, governing the social life of the people, and (3) The Ordinances, Exodus 24:12-31:18, governing the religious life of the people. That covers every aspect of community life: Moral, Social and Religious.

The Mosaic Covenant gave the people of Israel something new: a tabernacle and priesthood. The tabernacle was so that God could “dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Here’s how Dr. Charles Baker described it.

“In type, Israel needed to be cleansed constantly so that God might dwell among them. It was for this reason that the tabernacle worship with its priesthood was established ... The sacrificial system of the covenant was a means of grace. The Law is the expression of God’s holy character, and the breaking of it results in a curse (Galatians 3:10). On the basis of pure law the lawbreaker could hope for nothing but condemnation. The Levitical sacrifices provided the way of escape from the curse. Likewise, in this dispensation, the all-sufficiency of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is the means whereby our relationship with God is kept unbroken in spite of sin and failures which may break in on the Christian life.” *A Dispensational Theology*

God had already made a covenant with Israel through circumcision. Why another covenant? Here are some points worth pondering:

- To reveal the knowledge of sin. (Romans 7:7)
- To cause sin to become exceedingly sinful. (Romans 7:13)
- To stop every mouth and bring the whole world guilty before God. (Romans 3:19)

There are some things the Law cannot do:

- It cannot justify the sinner. (Romans 3:20)
- It cannot deliver from the dominion of sin. (Romans 6:14)
- It can make nothing perfect. (Hebrews 7:19)

The Mosaic Law is dead. It no longer exists. God no longer manages His household of faith through the Law and Works. He now manages through The Dispensation of Grace.

The Palestinian Covenant

This is simply a confirmation and amplification of the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. You can read the details in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. Dr. Dwight Pentecost had this to say about the Palestinian Covenant:

“An analysis of this passage will show that there are seven main features in the program there unfolded: (1) The nation will be plucked off the land for its unfaithfulness ... (2) there will be a future repentance of Israel ... (3) their Messiah will return ... (4) Israel will be restored to the land ... (5) Israel will be converted as a nation ... (6) Israel’s enemies will be judged ... (7) the nation will then receive her full blessing.” *Things To Come*

The Davidic Covenant

God delivered this unconditional covenant to King David of Israel by the prophet Nathan. [We named our son Nathan after the prophet Nathan and Christ's disciple Nathaniel. We admired both men greatly and hoped our Nathan would be like them in his spirituality and courage.] The covenant with David concerns four things: David's seed, David's house, David's throne, and David's kingdom. We find the specifics in 2 Samuel 7:12-16. "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who built a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne for his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

The New Covenant

Jeremiah was the first person to speak of the New Covenant by name. "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." [The nation Israel split into two nations when Rehoboam was king.] You will find nine references of the New Covenant in the New Testament (Matthew 26:28;

Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8, 13; 9:15; and 12:24).

It is new in that it fulfills, cancels, and takes the place of the Mosaic Covenant. Dr. Baker gives us an excellent breakdown of the New Covenant. He wrote that it is “unconditional, everlasting, promises a new heart and mind, provides forgiveness of sins, imparts the Holy Spirit as an indwelling presence, guarantees that the seed of Israel will never cease to be a national before God for ever, and provides for the restoration of Jerusalem and of the land to Israel.” (Dispensational Theology, pg. 101).

The New Covenant is something the world has yet to see. The promises are there. The time is coming. Israel will reign as the chief nation of the world with Christ on the throne. Israel will enter its eternal home, “The New Jerusalem,” and be at peace with God.

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