



“God’s promise of a great nation became a promise of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky.”

Covenant

as a Biblical Theme

By E. LeBron Matthews

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP between God and humanity, what does that look like? Fortunately, the Bible reveals the answer. Likewise it describes acceptable relationships between people—the details of which were often outlined in covenants. Covenants were binding agreements that defined relationships, the ancient equivalents to legal contracts and international treaties. They, therefore, were ideal for communicating what God designates as appropriate human behavior in relationships. Although not always stated overtly in the Bible, the thread of covenant weaves its way from Genesis to Revelation. The Old and New Testaments are the old covenant God made at Sinai and the new covenant He made in Christ.

In the Old Testament

Two verbs dominate Old Testament references to covenants. The first is commonly rendered “make” and denotes creating a covenant. The Hebrew word literally means “to cut,” an allusion to the use of sacrifices in initiating covenants (see Gen. 15, “made” in verse 18 is this verb).¹ The second Hebrew verb is rendered “establish.” It literally means “to stand up.” It pertains to carrying out one’s obligations under a covenant (see Gen. 17:7, “keep” is this verb).²

Genesis 6:18 contains the first biblical reference to covenants. Before the flood God promised Noah, “I will establish My covenant with you.”³ The language emphasizes God’s commitment to sustain the yet unstipulated covenant. After the flood God reaffirmed His commitment to this covenant (Gen. 9:9). At that time God specified all of Noah’s descendants and all surviving animal life were parties to this covenant. The rainbow became a sign of this covenant. It was a visual reminder God would never send another universal flood. God has kept His covenant agreement and not destroyed the entire planet by water. This covenant remains in effect. All subsequent events in history transpire within the context of this existing covenant.

The next significant biblical covenant was between Abraham and God. Sometime around the end of the third millennium B.C., God summoned a man named Abram, whose family was from the Mesopotamian city of Ur.⁴ The covenant grew out of God’s mandate for Abram to leave everything and go to an unspecified location (12:1-3). Abram’s family previously migrated from Ur 600 miles northwest to Haran.⁵ In response to God’s calling, Abram

moved to Canaan, which was an additional 400-plus miles to the southwest. Whereas the previous migration involved his father’s entire family, this move involved only Abram, his wife, and nephew. The scope of God’s pledge to Abram ranged from increasing his prodigy and reputation to the intangible idea of blessing. Later God promised to give Canaan to Abram’s descendants (13:14-17).

Years would pass before God entered into a formal covenant with Abram (15:18). The covenant sealed a relationship born out of a breathtaking expansion of God’s previous promises. God’s promise of a great nation became a promise of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram’s faith-filled response set the precedent (v. 6). Thereafter faith became essential for people to enter into a covenant relationship with God.

God initiated His covenant with Abram in a solemn rite involving the sacrifice of animals (vv. 9-11). This unique ceremony exposed another key component of biblical covenants. They were inaugurated with bloodshed. God’s commitments to Abram also took on new certainty. Previously God simply promised Abram certain blessings. Now the promise acquired the sense of a binding legal obligation. This new legal status emphasized the absolute certainty that God would fulfill His covenant obligations. Since a covenant was a contract binding two parties together, with each having specific obligations, the guarantee of God’s compliance stressed the need for human partners to fulfill their obligations as well.

When Abram was 99 years old, God again visited their covenant. In Genesis 15:18, the expression “the LORD made” denoted the beginning of the covenant relationship. In Genesis 17:2, the verb “establish” concerned continuing the covenant. God imposed two significant modifications to the contract. These changes were reminders of each party’s responsibility. First, Abram’s name was changed to Abraham. Abram means “exalted father.” Abraham means “father of a multitude.” So Abraham’s name became a reminder of God’s commitment to His promise that Abram’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Second, circumcision became the sign of this covenant for Abraham and for subsequent generations. It was a physical reminder to each individual that he was to comply personally with the covenant’s terms.

Centuries after Abraham’s death, his descendants were slaves in Egypt. God sent a fugitive



Right: From Ur’s Early Dynastic III period (about 2600–2500 B.C.), an electrotype copy of gold dagger and an

elaborate sheath. God instructed Abraham, “This is My covenant, which you are to keep, between Me

and you and your offspring after you: Every one of your males must be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10, HCSB).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (9/19/2)

felon named Moses to accomplish their emancipation. Moses' first effort appeared to be a disaster. God assured Moses, however, that He would keep His covenant obligation to give His people the land of Canaan. Furthermore, God stated that henceforth He would be worshiped by the name Yahweh (Ex. 6:2-8). Thereafter the name Yahweh (commonly rendered "the LORD" in English translations of the Old Testament) would remind God's people of their covenant with Him.⁶

God's giving the Law at Mount Sinai (19:1-24:18) marked the next phase of His covenant relationship with humanity. In one sense, the Sinai covenant merely transferred God's covenant with Abraham to the latest generation of his descendants. Yet the covenant took on fresh implications with an expanded emphasis on human responsibility. The

Above: Overlooking Anathoth, which is about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown.

Below: The western slope of Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey. The Book of Genesis records

God's words to Noah: "Understand that I am bringing a flood—floodwaters on the earth to destroy every creature under heaven with the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will die. But I will establish My covenant with you, and you will enter the ark with

your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives. You are also to bring into the ark two of all the living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you" (Gen. 6:17-19, HCSB). As the floodwaters receded, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

Ten Commandments were a delineation of Israel's covenant obligations. A series of case laws follows, setting forth real-life applications of these terms (20:22-23:33).

During the next 860 years, Israel demonstrated an inability to comply with the terms of the covenant. Periodically, spiritual revivals produced temporary covenant renewal. Josiah led the greatest revival and covenant renewal in Israel's history (2 Kings 23:1-25; 2 Chron. 34:14-35:19). The roots of sin, though, had been firmly established among the people through the preceding generations. After Josiah's death, the people abandoned the reforms and returned to unfaithfulness and idolatry. Covenant renewal failed to turn the tide of sin.⁷

Thereafter the prophet Jeremiah declared God would institute a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-40). Through this new covenant, God would radically change people's hearts. He would both forgive and forget their sin. Rather than being based in the Law, the new covenant would be based on participants enjoying an intimate fellowship with God through faith. This intimate relationship would be available to all—regardless of their status in society. This "relationship with the Lord of the covenant by faith [was] the goal of all the earlier covenants"⁸

In the New Testament

Hebrews 8:6-12 describes Christ as "the mediator of a better covenant." The passage quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in its entirety, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament. Zechariah prophesied that the birth of John the Baptist was part of God fulfilling His promises to Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). Mary, Jesus' mother, celebrated that the coming Savior was a fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham (vv. 46-55). Early Christians clearly associated Christ with Abraham's covenant (Acts 3:25) and with Jeremiah's new covenant (Rom. 11:27; 2 Cor. 3:6).

Previous covenants had been inaugurated through bloodshed. This new covenant is no different. During the Last Supper Jesus took a cup and said, "This is My blood that establishes the covenant; it is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁹ His words clearly alluded to Jeremiah's prophecy.



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SACRIFICIAL ANIMALS

For the covenantal ceremony, God instructed Abraham to gather five animals: “a three-year-old cow, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon” (Gen. 15:9, HCSB). For the ceremony, Abraham cut the goat, cow, and ram in half and left the birds whole.

(1) Landscape with cows near Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey. (2) Figurine depicting the head of a ram. From Susa, the ancient capital of Persia. Dated about 2600–1700 B.C. (3) Lone goat stands at Wadi Mujib, overlooking the Arnon River Valley in Jordan. (4) Species known as the Egyptian turtledove. (5) Terra-cotta statuette of a bird with her young; dated to the 5th cent. B.C.

Starting below and moving clockwise:



COWS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (25/14/2); RAM: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM/ PARIS (35/10/89); GOAT: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (40/2356); TURTLEDOVE: ISTOCK PHOTO; BIRD STATUETTE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRIENT BRUCE/ METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ NEW YORK (80/7528)

First Peter 2:9-10 echoes Exodus 19:5-6a, with some alteration. Peter’s words show how Jeremiah’s words of a new covenant written on people’s hearts and granting forgiveness had become a reality in Christ.

A distinction between the two covenants lies in the relationship between the people. The people at Sinai largely were descendants of Abraham. The majority of individuals in the new covenant do not share a common ethnic background. The only characteristic they share in common is faith in Christ. “Despite their differences, the divine covenants exhibit a structural and thematic unity.”¹⁰ Each relates God’s revelation of Himself and His desire for an intimate relationship. Likewise each covenant calls for godly behavior. Ultimately such conduct is the natural outgrowth of faith in Christ. **B**

1. Eugene Carpenter, “כרת” (*krt*, to cut, cut off) in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:729; Elmer B. Smick, “כרת” (*karat*, to cut off/to cut down) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [THWDBK], ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:457.
2. Elmer A. Martens, “קום” (*qum*, to stand up) in NIDOTTE, 3:902-904.
3. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
4. Joel F. Drinkard, Jr. and E. Ray Clendenen, “Chronology of the Biblical Period” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 293.
5. Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B in *The New American Commentary* [NAC] (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 91.
6. Brad Creed, “Names of God” in HIBD, 1172.
7. F.B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16 in NAC (Broadman Press, 1993), 280.
8. *Ibid.*, 285.
9. Matthew 26:28; see Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25.
10. Steven B. Cowan, “Covenant” in HIBD, 358.

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