
The Covenants – 1

The Bible that we hold in our hands is divided into two “testaments” – or *covenants*. The two words mean the same thing: an arrangement between two or more parties that governs their relationship for as long as the covenant is in force. In fact the Bible tells of more than two covenants, including some between God and people, and some between people. The division of our Bible simply reflects the two covenants that are considered to be the most important.

This study focuses on the broad scope of God’s covenants that He has made with people. As you read, remember that:

- there can only be *one covenant in force at a time* between the same parties
- anyone who tries to live outside the terms of the current covenant is doomed to failure

How a covenant works

A covenant involved:

- **One or more parties.** Most covenants were between two parties, such as God and Abraham (Genesis 17:2), Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21:27-32), David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:3). Sometimes a multi-party covenant had a *mediator* – a third party who acted as an intermediary or messenger, and through whom the covenant was made.
- **Obligations and expectations.** The covenant stated what each party would commit to. Occasionally the obligations were one-sided – one party covenanted to do (or not do) something, irrespective of the actions of the other party.
- **Vows and promises.** The parties would agree to be bound by the covenant.
- **Consequences** for breaking the covenant. These may be loss of property, loss of life, or much more.
- **Signs and seals.** Sometimes a covenant included a sign of acceptance. Many covenants involved the death of a sacrificial animal as a seal (hence a *blood covenant*).

Since a covenant often involved the shedding of blood (either the blood of the parties themselves or of animal substitutes), the Hebrew term used was to *cut a covenant*.

Making the covenant

It was common for the two parties of the covenant to kill sacrificial animals, cut the carcasses into halves, and lay them out on the ground. Then they would walk up and down between the pieces, saying something like, “May I end up like these animals if I break this promise.” See, for example, Genesis 15:10,17; 1 Kings 19:2; Ruth 1:17. The significance was that such a blood covenant could only be terminated by death.

Early covenants

The first covenant described in scripture was between *God* and *Noah* (Genesis 6:18). The terms were:

- Noah was to build the ark, and bring the animals into it (Genesis 6:19-21).
- God would save alive all those who were in the ark.

Noah accepted the terms of the covenant, did as he was told, and God did as He had promised.

After the Flood God made a *one-sided* covenant with Noah and all his descendants, including us (Genesis 9:9-17). He committed Himself to never again destroying the earth by a flood. This covenant involved a sign – the rainbow (v.13). “Whenever you see a rainbow...”

The covenant with Abraham

This is by far one of the most important covenants. It is recorded in Genesis chapters 12 and 15, and is expanded upon in ch.17.

Note:

- the parties – Genesis 15:1; 17:1
- the promises – 15:4,5,13,14-16; 17:6-8
- the obligations – 12:1; 15:6; 17:10-13
- the blood – 15:9,10; 17:10
- the sign or seal – 17:10 (see Romans 4:11)

This covenant is so foundational that Paul refers to it many times in the New Testament; he traces the origins of the New Covenant back to this one. That is why Romans and Galatians refer to Abraham so many times. The crucial things to note are:

- The covenant with Abraham included *all the nations of the world*, not just his direct descendants or the nation of Israel (12:3).
- The main obligation upon Abraham was *faith* that God could and would keep His promises (15:6).

Why did God make this covenant?

Why did God call Abraham? The fact that it was for the blessing of the whole world (Genesis 12:3) gives us a clue. This was *the beginning of God's redemptive work* whereby He would redeem *the whole of creation* and undo the work of satan, whose influence had permeated the whole human race.

The Mosaic covenant

The next major covenant is the one made with Israel through Moses. It was a reiteration of the covenant that God had made with Abraham and then renewed with Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 6:2-8). The covenant was first made at Sinai when the Israelites came out of Egypt (Exodus 19), but was later re-stated just before they entered Canaan (Deuteronomy chapters 28,29). Note:

- the parties – God and Israel (Deut 29:1)
- the mediator – Moses (Deut 29:1; Galatians 3:19)
- the purpose – the blessing of Israel, and through them of the whole world (Exodus 19:5,6)
- the terms – obedience (Exodus 20; Deut 28,29)
- the promise – of obedience (Exodus 24:7)
- the consequences – blessing if they obeyed, cursing if they disobeyed (Deut 28)
- the blood – of sacrificial animals (Exodus 24:8)

Why did God make this covenant?

God made this covenant with Israel for several reasons:

- He was choosing out for Himself a (holy) nation among whom He could dwell.
- He wanted to have a “headquarters” on earth (Deut 12:5-7,14; 14:23, etc.).
- He intended Israel to be the means whereby He could bless the whole world (Exodus 19:5,6).

Note that in the last point we see again His concern for *the whole earth*. The covenant with Israel was not only for their blessing, but so that *they could spread that blessing* to the rest of the world. This is a reiteration of the promise to Abraham: all the nations of the world were to be blessed.

This covenant is what is referred to elsewhere as the Old Covenant/Testament.

The elements of the covenant

Notice that the covenant with Israel involved several elements that we will see again later:

- the law
- the land
- the nation
- the temple
- the system of worship
- the presence of God

Israel understood these things. These elements came to be of supreme importance in the Jewish mind; they were the things that identified the nation. Land, law, temple – these were the essential factors of Jewishness. Imagine the reaction if (S)someone were to say they had been superseded!

The rest of the Old Testament story

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of how Israel failed to keep the terms of the covenant. Almost from the day that they fled from Egypt, they rebelled and disobeyed. See, for example, Exodus 32:9; Deut 9:24; Psalm 95.

For hundreds of years God remonstrated with the people, calling them back to the terms of the covenant. He allowed them to be troubled by other nations (see Judges). He sent prophets to call the people back to their obligations. He used famine, war, suffering to bring them to repentance. Finally, He called a halt and determined to move on.

- First the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians in the time of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah (in the 8th century BC).
- Finally the southern kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in the time of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel (in the 6th century BC).

See 2 Chronicles 36:6-20. Jeremiah tells of the loss of the land, the destruction of the temple, the loss of all the holy furnishings. Many Jews fled to Egypt, much to Jeremiah's sorrow (Jeremiah 44:12-14). As a result of their disobedience:

- The law was irretrievably broken.
- The land was lost.
- The nation was scattered.
- The temple was destroyed.
- The system of worship ceased.
- The glory of God departed (Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4,18; 11:22,23).

We can only imagine what that meant to a devout Israelite.

The burning question

The destruction of Jerusalem raised some heart-wrenching questions:

- If God had promised Abraham that He would bless the world through him and his descendants, had that promise now proven to be empty?
- Had Israel's faithlessness forever destroyed the chance for God to do what He said?
- *Could God be trusted to do what He promised?* In an ironic twist of misunderstanding, many Jews in the days of Jeremiah believed that God would not allow them to be taken captive, simply because they were His chosen people. They persecuted Jeremiah as a false prophet who, they thought, cast doubt on the faithfulness of God. Their memory of the covenant was selective!

The promise of a future return

With the destruction of Jerusalem it appeared that all had been lost. Yet many of the prophets had promised that there would be a national restoration. See, for example, Jeremiah 29:10. Daniel remembered this promise, and he prayed for the restoration (Daniel 9:2). Similarly, Ezekiel recorded a vision of a new temple (Ezekiel ch.40 onwards). The return from exile occurred in several stages under the leadership of Ezra, Nehemiah, and others. The temple was restored under Nehemiah's leadership around 440 BC (the *second* temple).

The glory departed

However, the glorious visions of the prophets were hardly reflected in the new state of Israel. The second temple was a mere shadow of the former glory (Haggai 2:3). The ancient furnishings and the holy fire were still lost. The holy of holies was empty. Even the Jewish people were more concerned with their own needs than the house of the Lord (Haggai 1:4). The glory was departed.

The inter-testamental period

Between the last book of the Old Testament and the first of the New Testament there is a period of about 400 years. During those centuries Israel continued to be under foreign powers – first the Medo-Persians, and then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. During that time God was silent.

Chronology of the period

The table below shows some of the major events of the inter-testamental period.

Date B.C.	Events
430	Nehemiah at Jerusalem; temple is rebuilt; Malachi prophesies. Israel is part of the Medo-Persian empire.
340	Alexander the Great conquers the Middle East. Israel is part of the Greek empire.
331	Death of Alexander; Greek empire is divided into four parts; Israel is part of the Seleucid portion.*
175	Antiochus Epiphanes rules the Seleucid empire.†
166	Revolt led by Judas Maccabaeus.
161	Death of Judas Maccabaeus.
63	Pompey brings Israel into the Roman empire.
40 – 4	Reign of Herod the Great, appointed by Rome.

* Daniel prophesied that the Greek empire would be divided into four parts (Daniel 8:20,21).

† Things came to a head during the reign of the “mad, bad and dangerous” Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes.

(Antiochus) sold the high priesthood to the highest bidder... [and] instituted a religious persecution of unprecedented bitterness. Sabbath-keeping and the practice of circumcision were forbidden on pain of death; pagan sacrifices and prostitution were established in the temple; and law-loving Jews were subjected to every degradation and brutality.

—New Bible Dictionary (IVCF)

Eventually rebellion broke out, led by Judas Maccabaeus. After years of guerrilla warfare, Judas marched into Jerusalem in 165 BC and solemnly cleansed the temple (leading to the feast of Hannukah). But after repeated battles and skirmishes, Judas was killed in 161 BC. The Hasmonaeen dynasty that he founded carried on until 37 BC, when the last of the Hasmonaeans was executed. By this time Rome dominated

the world, and the pro-Roman Herod the Great became ruler of Palestine. During his reign he rebuilt the temple (the *third* temple). One wall of this temple survives as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

What it meant to the Jews

The return from exile did not turn into the national resurrection that some had expected. Israel still lay under Gentile authority, and Daniel's prophecies of the coming of the Kingdom of God (Daniel 7:9,27) evidently remained to be fulfilled. Malachi had promised (Malachi 3:1):

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

What happened was that the Jews entered into an uneasy relationship with their Roman masters. Herod and his descendants were regarded by many as compromisers. They kept the peace (mostly) by a combination of brutality, judicious marriages and political chicanery. This era of national humiliation was a far cry from what the prophets had proclaimed. Were the promises of God void?

Under the domination of Rome, the Jews fell into three main groups as regards their relationship with the Romans:

- those who advocated rebellion against Rome and the establishment of the kingdom by force (the Zealots, such as Simon the Zealot, Luke 6:15)
- those who advocated cooperation with Rome and concentration upon temple worship (the Sadducees) or individual observance (the Pharisees)
- those who withdrew into a private, intense law-keeping, sometimes as separate communities such as the one at Qumran (the Essenes, authors of the Dead Sea scrolls)

The Jews now recognized that they were in this situation because of their failure to keep the covenant – that is, the Law. Groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees determined that from now on law-keeping and temple worship would be central to their lives.

The ones who hoped

There were some others, though, who pondered the prophecies of Daniel and counted up the years that Daniel had spoken of (Daniel chapter 9), and “looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38). They believed that the kingdom of God was imminent.

They were right, but not in the way they expected.