

Biblical Theology of Covenant

Agreements between God and
Humans

Introduction

- A **covenant** is an agreement based on a chosen relationship in which God promises to bless his people and humans choose to commit themselves to the terms and obligations set forth by God
- The concept of “covenant” exists at important turning points in the Bible’s storyline and is the glue that binds promises to fulfillment
- The biblical covenants form the unifying thread of God’s saving action through Scripture, beginning explicitly with Noah and reaching fulfillment in the new covenant ratified through the blood of Jesus Christ
- Covenant theology is an approach to biblical interpretation that appreciates the importance of the covenants for understanding the divine-human relationship and the unfolding of redemptive history in Scripture

Covenant at Creation

- There are good reasons to believe that a **covenant of life** was made in the [Garden of Eden](#), whereby God offered Adam a perfect and perpetual life if he did not violate God's single commandment, but warned that death would follow if he disobeyed that commandment
- The elements of a covenant were present at creation, for blessing was promised for obedience and cursing for disobedience
- Adam broke the covenant, who represented all mankind as a federal head ([Rom 5:12-21](#))
- It is not referred to as a covenant in the opening chapters of [Genesis](#), but is referred to as a covenant in Hosea 6:7, "But like Adam, they transgressed the covenant; there, they dealt faithlessly with Me"

The Covenant with Noah and All Creation

- The covenant with Noah is a covenant of **universal preservation**, signifying a new beginning for human beings and the continuance of life on earth until the time of the end
- The term is first introduced in [Gen. 6:18](#) and was established only after the flood had subsided ([Gen. 8:20–9:17](#))
- Despite the depth of sin, human beings are still made in God's image, and God continues to bless them as they are fruitful and multiply on the earth
- The flood testifies to what human beings deserve on account of wickedness, and it is a type of the final judgment to come ([Matt. 24:36–41](#); [2 Pet. 2:5](#))
- The bow in the clouds, the sign of the covenant, testifies that God has withdrawn his weapons of war, that he will preserve the world until redemption is accomplished

Abrahamic Covenant(s)

- The promises encompassed by God's covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are recorded in [Genesis 12:1-3](#):
- The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ²"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. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"
- God would bless Abraham in two ways:
- (1) he would become a great nation and so have a great name, and
- (2) through him God would mediate blessing to all peoples on earth

Abrahamic Covenant(s)

- Significantly, each of these promises are subsequently ratified by **covenant**:
- (1) the national dimension of God's promise is the focus of [Genesis 15](#), where God establishes "a covenant with Abram" (15:18);
- (2) the international dimension of the promise (ignored in [Gen. 15](#)) is alluded to in [Genesis 17](#) (cf. 17:4–6,16), where God announces an "everlasting covenant" (17:7), the so-called "covenant of circumcision" ([Acts 7:8](#))
- While many see the latter as simply unpacking further the covenant in [Genesis 15](#), the different circumstances and emphases suggest that it is actually a second stage in God's covenantal dealings with Abraham

Mosaic Covenant

- God established the Mosaic covenant after he freed Abraham's descendants from oppression in Egypt ([Exod. 19:4–6; 20:2](#))
- The focus at Sinai was **ethical** in nature—how the Israelites must conduct themselves within the land as God's chosen people ([Exod. 19:5–6](#))
- In order to be God's "**treasured possession**," "**kingdom of priests**," and "**holy nation**," Israel must keep God's covenant by submitting to its requirements (i.e., the stipulations set forth in [Exod. 20–23](#))
- By adhering to these and the subsequent covenant obligations given at Sinai, Israel would be manifestly different from other nations and thus reflect God's wisdom and greatness to surrounding peoples (cf. [Deut. 4:6–8](#))

Mosaic Covenant

- The covenant with Israel was gracious, for the Lord freed his people from Egyptian slavery. Blessings were promised for obedience and curses for disobedience
- Israel failed to abide by the covenant stipulations, summarized in the Ten Commandments and as a result was sent into exile
- The prophets declared in covenant lawsuits, which detailed Israel's violation of the covenant, that judgment was coming
- The covenant with Israel was meant to be a temporary stop-gap measure, because it did not transform the heart of those who heard the covenant demands

Davidic Covenant

- After Sinai, the next major development comes with Nathan's oracle to David ([2 Sam. 7](#); [1 Chr. 17](#)). David intends to build a house (i.e., temple) for God, but God promises to build a house (i.e., dynasty) for David
- Neither [2 Samuel 7](#) nor [1 Chronicles 17](#) explicitly describes this promise as a "covenant," but several other texts do (cf. [2 Sam. 23:5](#); [2 Chr. 7:18](#); [13:5](#); [Ps. 89:3](#); [Jer. 33:21](#))
- Significant link David to Abraham:
- God promises both "a great name" ([Gen 12:2](#); [2 Sam 7:9](#))
- The offspring of both would mediate international blessing ([Gen 22:18](#); [Ps 72:17](#))
- The Davidic covenant identifies more precisely that the promised "seed" will mediate international blessing—a royal descendant of Abraham through David

Davidic Covenant

- The covenant with David stands in continuity with previous covenants:
- The rule over the world given to Adam would be realized through a King
- The promises of offspring, land, and blessing given to Abraham would be secured through the Davidic ruler
- In a similar way the blessings promised in the Mosaic covenant would come to fruition under faithful Davidic kings, but if they strayed from the Lord, then the curses would come
- Despite the **conditional** elements, the covenant with David was ultimately **unconditional**
- God guaranteed a Davidic king on the throne but the covenant promise would only be fulfilled by an obedient king, and the NT claims that this is Jesus of Nazareth

New Covenant

- Persistent failure to live according to God's covenant requirements led to inevitable disaster for both the nation, resulting in judgment, the destroyed temple, and Babylonian exile
- This might have spelled the end for Israel, if God were not faithful to his covenant promises. Thus, a "new covenant" was inaugurated
- It is mentioned explicitly as a "new covenant" only once in the OT ([Jer. 31:31-32](#)):
- "The days are coming," declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD"

New Covenant

- The new covenant represents the **culmination of God's saving work** among his people
- God regenerates his people by his Spirit and renews their hearts so that they obey him ([Eze 36:26-27](#)):
- ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you: I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.
- According to the NT Gospels and letters, the new covenant was ratified through Jesus's death on the cross ([1 Cor. 11:25](#)):
- ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me"