

The Biblical Covenants

The Definition of a Covenant

A covenant is a compact or agreement between two parties which binds them to certain commitments from one to another or to each other. Theologically, in relations between God and man, it denotes God's gracious commitment to bless man.

Aspects of a Covenant

Covenants are characteristically unalterable and permanently binding.

Covenants may be conditional or unconditional. Conditional covenants are binding if certain reciprocal commitments are maintained. Unconditional covenants are binding regardless of the action of another party.

Covenants could be between people or between God and man. The parity covenant was made between equals, such as Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21:22-32), Isaac and Abimelech (Genesis 26:26-33) and Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:44-45). The suzerainty covenant was made between a superior and an inferior, such as a king to a vassal. This is the form of the covenants which God made with man.

A pattern can be observed with Old Testament covenants which follows what was often done in treaties in the Ancient Near East. There are stipulations or commandments, an oath taken by an act of swearing, and blessings and cursing. When God made a covenant with man He did so with the language that man would understand as entering into a contract.

With Biblical covenants we often find a sign of the covenant. This is an outward expression of the commitment that has been made between God and man.

The Noahic Covenant

While some consider God as making a covenant with Adam to not eat from the tree of life, the first occasion of the word "covenant" is found in Genesis 6:18 with regard to Noah and the flood. In this covenant, God promised never to destroy all flesh with a flood again (Genesis 9:11).

The sign of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow (Genesis 9:12-15). It served to remind man that God had promised to never flood the earth. This covenant would remain for all successive generations.

The Noahic covenant was unilateral in that man has no responsibility in the covenant. God will do all of what he promised (Genesis 9:12). Thus, this covenant was unconditional, universal and everlasting (Genesis 9:9-12).

The Abrahamic Covenant

A. The Parties of the Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic covenant was established by God with Abraham, his physical descendants and the people of Israel (Genesis 15:18; 17:4-8, 19-21).

B. The Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant

The sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision. Circumcision was a physical demonstration of God's commitment to His people, Abraham's physical descendants.

C. The Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

God made three major kinds of promises in the Abrahamic Covenant:

1. Personal promises to Abraham

- a. To bless Abraham and make him a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2).
- b. To make his name great (Genesis 12:2).
- c. To give him many descendants (Genesis 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:6).
- d. To make him a father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-5).
- e. To give him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:8).
- f. To bless those who would bless him and curse those who would curse him (Genesis 12:3).

2. National promises to Abraham

- a. To make Abraham's physical descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:2).
- b. To give the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River to Abraham's physical descendants forever (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8).
- c. To give the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham's descendants as an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7, 19).

3. Universal promise to the world: All the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's physical lineage (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14).

4. Summary of promises to Abraham

God's promises to Abraham can be divided into three types: promises involving the land of Canaan, promises involving the descendants of Abraham and promises of blessing to God's people.

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D. The Partial Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in History

1. Fulfillment of the personal promises to Abraham

- a. God blessed Abraham (Genesis 24:1, 35).
- b. God made Abraham a blessing to others (e.g. Genesis 14).
- c. God has made Abraham's name great as he is mentioned 41 times in the Old Testament after the Book of Genesis and 64 times in the New Testament. Even Judaism and Islam respects him greatly today.
- d. He has many descendants and is the father of many nations, from Israel to the Arab nations which descended from him through Ishmael.

2. Fulfillment of national promises to Abraham

- a. God made Israel a great nation of Abraham's descendants.
- b. God gave Israel the promised land after the exodus from Egypt (Deuteronomy 31:7-8; 32:45-52 and Joshua 1:1-11).
- c. Israel has never perished as a people, which is necessary in order for the national blessings to be completely fulfilled.

3. Fulfillment of universal promises to Abraham

God has made great blessing available to all the families of the earth through Abraham's physical line in the person of Jesus Christ.

4. Principles of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant

- a. The parts of the Abrahamic Covenant which have been fulfilled thus far have been fulfilled literally. This would lead us to believe that God intends to fulfill every promise of that covenant in the same manner.
- b. Some part of the Abrahamic Covenant have not been fulfilled completely. God has not yet given the entire land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants as an everlasting possession.
- c. When the Abrahamic Covenant was formally established (Genesis 15:7-21) it was established unilaterally by God and without any conditions which must be met by Abraham or anyone else. According to Galatians 3:15, once a covenant has been established no conditions can be added to it.

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Conclusion: If the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional and if God fulfills His promises literally, then we can expect that God will one day give the nation of Israel the entire land from the Nile to the Euphrates. This promise that remains is a fundamental argument in support of premillennialism, which teaches that there will be a future regathering of the nation of Israel on earth .

Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-24)

The Mosaic Covenant was an outgrowth of the Abrahamic Covenant in the sense that it was a significant intimate agreement between God and Abraham's descendents whereby they could achieve their purpose as a nation, to experience God's blessing and be a blessing to all the earth (Genesis 12:3). It did not change the Abrahamic Covenant but rather it was an additional covenant between God and His people.

A. The Contrast Between the Mosaic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant

1. Under the Mosaic Covenant, Israel had specific responsibilities to fulfill in order to obtain God's promised blessings (Exodus 19:5). That that sense the covenant to Moses was conditional rather than unconditional.
2. The Mosaic Covenant was based upon and already accomplished act of grace in the exodus from Egypt while the Abrahamic Covenant rested on solely on the promise of God which was the object of Abraham's trust (e.g. Genesis 15:6).

B. The Sign of the Mosaic Covenant

The sign of the Mosaic Covenant was the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-16). The Sabbath served as a reminder to Israel that they, as God's people, were separate from the nations of the world. It also served to teach them to trust God since work was prohibited on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:15). Recognizing that the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant helps explain why the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8) is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament.

C. The Promises of the Mosaic Covenant

1. Israel would be God's special treasure, enjoying a unique national relationship with God (Exodus 19:5).
2. Israel would be a kingdom of priests, taking the role of the mediator in bringing the nations of the world to God (Exodus 19:6).
3. Israel would be a holy nation, devoted to God and separated from sin and defilement by obeying the Law (Exodus 19:6).

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The rest of the Law of Moses is built upon these covenantal promises. While Israel could have been a testimony to the world of the blessing of God, they experienced those blessings partially due to the partial obedience of Israel. Yet none of the Abrahamic promises were removed since those promises were not conditional.

The Palestinian Covenant

The Palestinian Covenant, sometimes called the Deuteronomic Covenant was established in Moab and is found in Deuteronomy 29-30. It is introduced in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant and in spite of being clearly separated from the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 29:1), it is often considered to be merely a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant to a new generation.

Rather than a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant, the Palestinian Covenant is really a further development of the Abrahamic Covenant. We can observe the following elements of the Abrahamic Covenant expanded in the Palestinian Covenant:

A. The Promise of Land

The Abrahamic Covenant set the promise of the Land of Canaan to the people of Israel. At Moab their ownership of the land was reaffirmed and they will be gathered from the ends of the earth to possess the land which was promised to them. Their ownership of the land was unconditional and permanent but their possession of the land was based upon their obedience to God (Deuteronomy 30:1-5).

B. The Promise of Descendants

The Abrahamic Covenant set the promise of physical descendants to Abraham and his seed. At Moab, this promise was also repeated (Deuteronomy 30:5).

C. The Promise of Blessing

The Abrahamic Covenant set the promise that Abraham and his line would be blessed and would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. In Deuteronomy 30:6 we see the evidence of this blessing in the words which will echo the New Covenant concept of the circumcision of the heart. God will fulfill His commitment to bless His people in spite of their disobedience and this blessing will be ultimately established in the New Covenant, which is another development from the Abrahamic Covenant.

Therefore, the Palestinian Covenant expanded the Abrahamic Covenant by promising possession of the land in spite of Israel's past and future failure under the Law of Moses. While their permanent future possession of the land was certain, the promise would be enjoyed by each specific generation only as they obeyed the commandments of God.

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Davidic Covenant

The content of the Davidic Covenant is recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8-19. Although the word "covenant" does not appear in the text of 2 Samuel, it is clear from other passages that God was making a covenant with David (cf. 2 Samuel 23:5; 2 Chronicles 7:18; 21:7; Psalm 89:3-4, 28-29, 34-37; Jeremiah 33:19-26). The Davidic Covenant is a further development of the Abrahamic Covenant in that it expands on the promises of physical descendants to Abraham.

Some of these promises which God gave unconditionally to David were to be fulfilled in David's lifetime, including his great name (7:9), and rest from his enemies (7:11). But the most significant promises of this covenant (2 Samuel 7:16) were designed to be realized by David's seed, including:

- A. The promise that David's "house" or lineage would endure forever (7:11, 16; cf. Psalm 89:3-4, 29, 36). The people of Israel will never be eliminated.
- B. David's kingdom will be established forever (7:13, 16). This kingdom has not continually functioned but it will be established forever into eternity through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is another strong argument for Premillennialism.
- C. David's throne will be established forever (7:13, 16; cf. 2 Samuel 3:10; 1 Kings 1:37, 47). This is in reference to the ruling authority of David and will be fulfilled also by the Messiah.

While there were many centuries when David's ruling authority was inactive, it never passed away permanently. This is how Gabriel could indicate the house, kingdom and throne of David would be fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 1:32-33).

The New Covenant

The New Covenant is revealed initially in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and is the final covenantal expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant. While the Palestinian Covenant expanded the promise of land from ownership to possession, and the Davidic covenant expanded the promise of descendants from being numerous and a great nation to being an everlasting kingdom, the New Covenant expanded the promise of blessing a statement of general blessing to a specific disclosure of the type of blessedness — a knowledge of God based on the forgiveness of sin.

A. The Parties of the New Covenant

It is clear that God gave the New Covenant to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" or the people of Israel (Jeremiah 31:31). The people of Israel were the literal physical descendants of Abraham and we cannot spiritualize who the covenant we given to without violating basic hermeneutical principles.

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B. The Promises of the New Covenant

1. God promised regeneration (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26).
2. God promised the forgiveness of sin (Jeremiah 31:34; Ezekiel 36:25).
3. God pledged the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:27).
4. God promised the knowledge of God (Jeremiah 31:34).
5. God promised His people would obey Him (Ezekiel 36:27; 37:23-24; Jeremiah 32:39-40).
6. God promised certain national promises (cf. Ezekiel 34-37).

C. The Nature of the New Covenant

1. The New Covenant was unconditional with no conditions attached. Disobedience did not nullify it and in fact God indicated that it was given because of Israel's inability to obey (Ezekiel 26:21-22) and that God would bring about their obedience.
2. The New Covenant was everlasting (Ezekiel 37:26). It could never be abolished or annulled by Israel or anyone else.
3. This covenant is given in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant (Jeremiah 31:32) which God had established with Israel. This contrast between the New Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant is repeated in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 3; Hebrews 8:7-13).

D. The Sign of the New Covenant

There is no specific passage that defines the sign of the New Covenant, however there is a strong indication that God intended the Lord's Supper to be the outward recognition of God's commitment to His people under this covenant. In Luke 22:20 Jesus explained that "this cup is the New Covenant in My Blood" and 1 Corinthians 11:25 repeats this statement in the context of the Lord's Supper. The cup of the communion service represents the New Covenant which God promised to Israel in Jeremiah 31.

E. The Church and the New Covenant

While Jeremiah 31 clearly states the New Covenant was given to Israel, we must examine the relationship of the New Covenant to the Church. It is also clear that the Church participates in the New Covenant

1. The Church practiced the Lord's Supper which was based on the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:23-30; 10:21).
2. The Church enjoyed the blessings of the New Covenant, including:

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- a. Regeneration (1 Timothy 3:5).
 - b. Forgiveness of sin (Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:14).
 - c. The indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
 - d. A new heart (Romans 7:22; 2 Corinthians 3:3; 2 Peter 1:4).
3. The apostles functioned as ministers of a New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6).

While it is clear that the Church is participating in the New Covenant which God gave to Israel, the New Covenant is not being fulfilled completely in the Church today. The promises of the New Covenant await their complete fulfillment in the literal nation of Israel for these reasons:

1. The very people God made His unconditional commitment to have yet to receive as a people the promises which God made. He cannot leave His promises unfulfilled.
2. The people of Israel were given more than only spiritual promises. They were also given promises of blessing to the nation as a whole which are impossible for individuals in the Church to fulfill. For example, wild beasts will be eliminated from their land (Ezekiel 34:25-28), the nation would receive no more threats and insults from other nations (Ezekiel 34:25-28), and there will be a great abundance of food (Ezekiel 34:28-29). How can these be fulfilled in the church.
3. God's promise to Israel was reaffirmed in the New Testament. God will restore the nation of Israel (Romans 11:25-29) for His gifts and calling of Israel to enter the New Covenant is irrevocable.