

THE COVENANTS

A biblical covenant may be defined as a promise by God, formalised in a legal agreement with benefits for adhering to and penalties for violating the terms, that is solemnised by a sacrifice and guaranteed by an oath. In biblical times the making of covenants was common, such as between persons, clans or nations, and the concept was well understood.

Such treaties or covenants could either be between equal parties (individuals or groups) for mutual benefit, called 'parity' covenants, or 'suzerain' covenants where one party was superior and dictated the terms, which can only be accepted or rejected in their entirety, and in which the other party could be severely penalised for violating.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word used for covenant is *berit*, which also used for a wide variety of oath-binding commitments, including personal agreements business arrangements, pledges, marriages, clan alliances and national treaties. In the New Testament the Greek word used for covenant is *diatheke* which describes a grant of possessions and rights by a party with absolute power to define the terms which the other party can only accept or reject, but not change the terms.

There are several examples of covenants (*berit*) between different persons, or persons and groups in the Bible:

- **Abraham and Abimelech** (Genesis 21:22-34) to avoid conflict and to agree ownership of a well.
- **Jacob and Laban** (Genesis 31:44-54) not to harm each other.
- **Joshua and the people of Gibeon** (Joshua 9:15-19) Joshua was tricked into making a peace treaty with the Gibeonites guaranteeing their safety.
- **Abner and David** (2 Samuel 3:1-13) where Abner, a powerful leader of those loyal to Saul, changed sides to support David, which led to David making a covenant with the elders of Israel who then anointed him king of Israel (2 Samuel 5:3).
- **David and Jonathan** (1 Samuel 18:1-4) made a covenant because of their friendship, which was extended to their heirs (2 Samuel 21:7).

The Bible refers to 5 specific covenants, all of which were initiated by God:

1. Noah. 2,348 BC (Genesis 6:18, 8:20-22, 9:8-17). Made by God with Noah and his descendants (all humanity) just after the flood, as a universal, everlasting, and unconditional covenant, and in which the rainbow was given as a sign. Noah offered a sacrifice of animals and birds (Genesis 8:20-21).

Genesis 9:8-10 *Then God told Noah and his sons, "I hereby confirm my covenant with you and your descendants, and with all the animals that were on the boat with you - the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals - every living creature on earth.*

2. Abraham. 1,913 BC (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:13-18, 17:1-14, 19, 23:15-18). Made by God with Abram (name changed to Abraham) and through him the nation of Israel, and its blessings are now available to all through faith (Romans 4:11). Right back in Genesis God had promised that all the families of the world would be blessed through the physical line of Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 22:18). This is a reference to the Messiah, who would come from the line of Abraham. Hence this too is an universal, everlasting, and unconditional covenant, with the sign of circumcision of the flesh (Genesis 17:11) and of the heart (Romans 2:29).

Genesis 17:4-5 *"This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations.*

As part of this covenant, God also promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan, on which Israel was established, referred to as the 'Land' or (incorrectly) 'Palestine' covenant (Genesis 15:1-21

and confirmed in Genesis 17:8). The geographical boundaries of the promised land are laid out in Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; and especially 15:18-21).

Genesis 15:18-21 *So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River - the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."*

3. Moses. 1,491 BC to AD 33 (Exodus 19:5-8, 24:3-8, 31:13-17). Made by God with the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:5-7, Romans 2:12, 19), in which they were given the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and all the laws (Exodus 24:3-8, 31:13-17). The blessings promised under this covenant were conditional on their obedience to the law (Deuteronomy 5:32, 28:1-14) with curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The sign was observance of the sabbath (Exodus 31:13), and this covenant was abolished with the death of Christ (Acts 13:38-39, Galatians 3:24-25). This covenant is called the Old Covenant, or the Mosaic covenant after Moses, and because as it was made at Mount Sinai it is also sometimes called the Sinai covenant.

Exodus 19:5-6 *Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' This is the message you must give to the people of Israel.*

Exodus 34:27 *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down all these instructions, for they represent the terms of the covenant I am making with you and with Israel."*

4. David. 1,042 BC (2 Samuel 7:1-29, Psalm 89:3-37). Made by God with David and his seed, as a unilateral, unconditional and everlasting covenant, the sign being Christ's resurrection and enthronement (Acts 3:30-33) and to be finally fulfilled when Jesus ascends David's throne in the Millennium (Luke 1:32).

Psalm 89:3-4 *The LORD said, "I have made a covenant with David, my chosen servant. I have sworn this oath to him: 'I will establish your descendants as kings forever; they will sit on your throne from now until eternity.'"*

5. New Covenant (Messianic Covenant). 33 AD (Isaiah 59:20-21, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:24-31, 37:26-28, Hebrews 8:8-12, 10:15-18) made by God as a unilateral, unconditional and everlasting covenant, to be accepted and enjoyed by faith by all believers spiritually now, and to be enjoyed by ethnic converted Israel at Christ's return, both spiritually and physically (Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:28, 37:14, 37: 24-28, 39:25-29). The sign or symbol is the bread and the wine (Matthew 26:26-28, 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). This covenant superseded and entirely replaced the Old Covenant that God gave Moses (Hebrews 8:13, Galatians 3:13-14, 3:19, 24-25, 5:2-4) and is open to all believers in Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile.

Hebrews 10:16-18 *"This is the new covenant I will make with my people on that day, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he says, "I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds." And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.*

Friends

The partners in a covenant relationship refer to each other as friends. In societies where covenant-making was practiced and understood there was no higher honour than to be called "friend." Because of the covenant God made with him, God referred to Abraham as His friend (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8-10; James 2:23). Jesus also called his followers His "friends" (John 15:12-15). Because of our covenant relationship with God, we too can be His friends - what an honour!

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