

Major Covenants of the Bible

A Study Outline



Michael D. Taylor

www.TaylorNotes.Info

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. What is a biblical “covenant”?

1. The word “covenant” means an act of God in freely establishing a mutually binding relationship with humankind.¹
2. The Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*.
3. William D. Mounce defines a covenant (H. *berith*) to be a “treaty.”²
4. F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs express *berith* as a “divine constitution or ordinance with signs or pledges.”³
5. According to Herman Bavinck, the Hebrew word for covenant *berith* “comes from the verb “to cut” and refers to the ancient Eastern custom of passing between parts of a slain animal laid out on opposite sides from each other, to symbolize that the violator of the covenant will suffer the same fate as that of the animals.”⁴
6. Bavinck states that a covenant is characterized by three factors:⁵
 - a) An oath or promise including stipulations.
 - b) A curse for violation.
 - c) A cultic ceremony symbolically representing the curse.

B. Types of covenants

1. Two types of covenants exist in the Bible:
 - a) Conditional (bilateral): God blesses humans as they obey the terms of the covenant.
 - b) Unconditional (unilateral): God bestows blessings on humans regardless of their obedience or disobedience to the terms of the covenant.
2. The Bible speaks of seven different covenants⁶, six of which God made exclusively with the nation of Israel.
 - a) Six of the covenants are *unconditional* in nature...that is, regardless of man's obedience or disobedience God still will fulfill these covenants.
 - b) One of the covenants is *conditional* in nature... that is, this covenant will bring either blessing or cursing depending on the Israel's obedience or disobedience (cf. Deut. 28).

II. ADAMIC COVENANT

A. Genesis 1:26-30.

1. God creates man and woman.

B. Genesis. 2:16-17

1. God. Gives Adam and Eve the choice of obeying or disobeying.

C. Genesis 3:15-19

1. "Bruise his heel." Satan will attempt to defeat Christ's work on earth, and at the cross.
2. "Crush your (Satan) head." Christ will defeat Satan when he is raised from the grave.
3. Women will experience pain in childbirth.
4. "Women's desire will be for their husband." Meaning is somewhat ambiguous: 1) sexual desire, or 2) desire to dominate.⁷
5. "He will rule over you." Describing male leadership, not male dominance.⁸ (See 1 Cor. 11:3. "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God").
6. The ground is cursed.
7. Man must toil the ground in order to survive.
8. Man must die.

III. NOAHIC COVENANT

A. Genesis 8:20—9:17

1. God would never curse the ground again (8:21-22).
2. Meat was added to man's diet (9:3-4).
3. A man who takes another's life is to forfeit his own life (9:6).
4. Man was commanded by God to repopulate the earth (9:7).
5. This is the first explicit covenant (H. *berith*) God made—it is to all men (9:10).
6. The covenant was unconditional (9:8-11).
7. The covenant is everlasting (9:12).
8. Mankind would never again be destroyed by flood (9:11, 15).
9. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, God will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between himself and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." (Gen. 9:17). Notice the presence of a rainbow again in Revelation 4:3 and 10:1.

B. Six Distinctives of the Noahic Covenant

Robert L. Deffenbaugh points out six distinctives of the Noahic Covenant.⁹

1. The Noahic Covenant was initiated and dictated by God.
 - a) The sovereignty of God is clearly seen in this covenant. While some ancient covenants were the result of negotiation, this one was not.

- b) God initiated the covenant as an outward expression of His purpose revealed in Genesis 3:20-22. God dictated the terms of the covenant to Noah, and there was no discussion.
2. The Noahic Covenant was made with Noah and all successive generations.

"And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creation that is with you, for all successive generations;'" (Genesis 9:12).

- a) This covenant will remain in force until the time when our Lord returns to the earth to cleanse it by fire (II Peter 3:10).
3. It is a universal covenant: While some covenants involve a small number, this particular covenant includes "all flesh," that is, all living creatures, including man and animals:

"Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth." (Genesis 9:9, 10)

4. The Noahic Covenant is an unconditional covenant.
- a) Some covenants were contingent upon both parties carrying out certain stipulations. Such was the case of the Mosaic covenant. If Israel kept the law of God, they would experience the blessings and prosperity of God. If not, they would be expelled from the land (Deuteronomy 28).
- b) The blessings of the Noahic covenant were not conditional. God would give regularity of seasons and would not destroy the earth by a flood simply because He said so. While certain commands were given to mankind in verses 1-7, these are not viewed as conditions to the covenant. They are technically not included as a part of the covenant.
5. This covenant was God's promise never again to destroy the earth by a flood.

"...and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh" (Genesis 9:15).

- a) God will destroy the earth by fire (II Peter 3:10), but only after salvation has been purchased by the Messiah and the elect are removed, even as Noah was protected from the wrath of God.
6. The sign of the Noahic Covenant is the rainbow:

"I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh" (Genesis 9:13-15).

- a) Every covenant has its accompanying sign. The sign of the Abrahamic Covenant is circumcision (Genesis 17:15-27); that of the Mosaic Covenant is the observance of the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-17).

- b) The "sign" of the rainbow is appropriate. It consists of the reflection of the rays of the sun in the particles of moisture in the clouds. The water which destroyed the earth causes the rainbow. Also, the rainbow appears at the end of a storm. So this sign assures man that the storm of God's wrath (in a flood) is over.
- c) Most interesting is the fact that the rainbow is not designed so much for man's benefit (in this text, at least) but for God's. God said that the rainbow would cause Him to remember His covenant with man. What a comfort to know that God's faithfulness is our guarantee

IV. ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

A. Gen. 12:1-3

1. By faith Abraham had to leave his home and go to a land which God would show him.
2. From Abraham will come a great nation.
3. Abraham will be blessed, and his name made great.
4. Those who bless Abraham and his descendants will be blessed.
5. Those who curse Abraham and his descendants will be cursed.
6. All people will be blessed through Abraham's descendants.

B. Gen. 15:12-21

1. Abraham's descendants would return to the Promised Land after the period of their slavery in Egypt (400 years).
2. Egypt will be punished.
3. Abraham will live to an old age.
4. Abraham's descendants will inherit the (promised) land.
5. Only God passed through the pieces of sacrificed animals. His presence is symbolized by the smoking firepot with a blazing torch. It was an unconditional covenant.

C. Gen. 17:1-14

1. The covenant is confirmed.
2. God would give Abraham many descendants
3. Many nations would descend from him.¹⁰
4. Kings will come through Abraham's line.
5. The covenant will be everlasting.
6. The land of Canaan will be given to Abraham and his descendants forever.
7. Circumcision is given as a sign of the covenant.

V. PALESTINIAN COVENANT¹¹

A. Deut. 28:63-68; 30:1-3

1. The nation will be plucked off the land for its unfaithfulness (Deut. 28:63-68)
2. There will be a future repentance of Israel (Deut. 28:63-68; 30:1-3)

B. Deut. 30:3-9

1. Their Messiah will return (Deut. 30:3-6)
2. Israel will be restored to the land (Deut. 30:5)
3. Israel will be converted as a nation (Deut. 30:4-8; cf. Rom. 11:26-27)
4. Israel's enemies will be judged (Deut. 30:7)
5. The nation of Israel will receive its full blessing (Deut. 30:9)

C. Names of the Land

1. Canaan: Its original name (Genesis 11:31-32; 12:5-6; 16:3).
2. Israel: The name used from time of Joshua until the time of Christ (Matthew 2:20-21), and up to the Jewish Revolt in A.D. 135.
 - a) The second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135) was prompted by the Emperor Hadrian, who during his travels through Judea in 130 AD indulged himself in several provocations, including a decree banning circumcision, construction of a tomb to Pompey (who had desecrated the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem in 63 BC) and the pronouncement that he would rebuild Jerusalem as the Roman city *Aelia Capitolina*, including construction of a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus on the site of Herod's temple.
 - b) Apparently designed to provoke a reaction, Hadrian's actions certainly did not sit well with the natives, who promptly revolted under the leadership of Simon Bar Kokhba.
3. Palestine: is a Latinized name given to the region by the Roman emperor Hadrian to blot out the name of Israel.
 - a) Occupants of Palestine (A.D. 135—1917)
 - (1) Romans
 - (2) Byzantines
 - (3) Muslims
 - (4) Crusaders
 - (5) Ottomans (Turks)
 - (6) British
 - b) 1917: (*Balfour Declaration*): Letter from Lord Arthur James Balfour, British Foreign Minister to Baron de Rothschild of Paris on November 2, 1917, declared, "Palestine as the national home for the Jewish People..."¹²
4. Israel: The State of Israel was proclaimed on May 14, 1948.

VI. SINAITIC (MOSAIC) COVENANT

MOSAIC COVENANT		
CEREMONIAL LAWS Involved worship, offering, and feast practices.	CIVIL LAWS Involved regulations for daily living, and punishments for crimes.	MORAL LAWS The Ten Commandments based on loving God (Exod. 20:3-11; Mark 12:30), and loving others (Exod. 20:12-17, Mark 12:31)

A. Mosaic Law (Exodus 19—40; Leviticus; Numbers 15; 18; 19; 28; 30; Deut. 4—30).

1. A conditional covenant made between God and Israel (Exod. 19:1-6)
2. Ten Commandments plus 603 additional laws = 613 Laws
3. 365 negative laws (60%) + 248 positive laws (40%) = 613 laws¹³
4. If Israel obeyed God they would be blessed, if they disobeyed, they would be cursed (Deut. 28:1-68). Notice the use of the word "if."

B. The seven purposes of the Mosaic Law:¹⁴

1. Purpose #1: To reveal what sin is (Romans. 7:7).
2. Purpose #2: To reveal God's holy character to the nation of Israel (Leviticus 19:2; 20:7-8).
3. Purpose #3: To provide forgiveness of sin through sacrifices and offerings (Leviticus 1—7).
4. Purpose #4: To set apart the nation of Israel as distinct from all the other nations (Exodus 19:5).
5. Purpose #5: To provide a way of worship for Israel through the yearly feasts (Leviticus 23).
6. Purpose #6: To provide God's direction for Israel's physical and spiritual health (Exodus 21—23; Deuteronomy 6:4-19; Psalm 119:97-104).
7. Purpose #7: The Law caused people, after Christ came, to see that they couldn't keep the Law but needed to accept Christ as personal Savior, for He had fulfilled the Law in His life and paid the penalty for our breaking it in His death, burial, and bodily resurrection.

C. Misunderstandings of the Mosaic Law.¹⁵ The word "law" in the New Testament has at least three different meanings when used in different contexts.

1. The Mosaic Law (See "[Mosaic Law](#)" above). Matthew 22:36-40.
2. Whole OT: It can refer to the whole Old Testament, "the Law or the Prophets" (Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 8:13).

3. The Traditions: Israel twisted the Mosaic law into man-made legalism (Mark 7:4, 8, 9; Galatians 1:14). That is, they severed it from its foundation of faith, failed to stress dependence on the Spirit, and thus turned the commandments into a job description for how to earn the wages of salvation. Their zeal of these traditions was not based on a knowledge of what the law represented (Roman 10:2-4). These traditions were initially passed down orally, then put into written form after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The written form is now in the Talmud which consists of:
 - a) Mishnah: an authoritative collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law and forming the first part of the Talmud. Also called "fence laws (Heb. *gezeirah*, a "fence" around the Torah).
 - b) Gemara: a rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah, forming the second part of the Talmud.

D. Jesus the perfect sacrifice

1. The Hebrew writer believes that while people under the old covenant were certainly justified and forgiven, it was not by any the sacrifice of blood offered under the old covenant, but by *anticipation* of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Forgiveness before the cross was provisional.
2. The sins forgiven were not taken away and remembered no more. The Hebrew writer explains that "in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year".
3. When Christ made his perfect sacrifice, those other *merely symbolic sacrifices* could — and should— have ceased. Now there is a forgiveness of sins in which there is no more remembrance of sin.

E. How Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic Law:¹⁶

1. Jesus personally obeyed the law.
2. He fulfilled the messianic predictions.
3. He empowered his people to obey it.
4. He brought out its true meaning.
5. He explained the true meaning behind the rituals and ceremonies.
6. He gave additional commands that furthered the intentions of the Law.

F. Does the Mosaic Law Apply Today?

1. The Ceremonial Laws no longer apply because they were completely fulfilled by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17).
2. The Civil Laws are no longer in effect but mankind has always established laws for coexisting.
3. The principles of the Moral Laws are still in effect today and can be found in the New Testament.

PRINCIPLES	OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
<i>Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength</i>	Deut. 6:5	Mark 12:30
1. Worship God only.	Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7	Matt. 4:10
2. Do not make and worship idols.	Exod. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10	Luke 16;13
3. Use God's name in ways that honor him.	Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11	Matt. 5:34
4. Rest on the Sabbath day and think about God.	Exod. 20:8; Deut. 5:12-15	Mark 2:27-28
<i>Love others as you love yourself</i>	Lev. 19:18	Mark 12:31
5. Respect and obey your parents.	Exod. 20:12, Deut. 5:16	Eph. 6:1-3
6. Protect and respect human life.	Exod. 20:13, Deut. 5:17	1 John 3:15
7. Be true to your husband or wife.	Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18	Matt. 5:28
8. Do not take what belongs to others.	Exod. 20:15; Deut. 5:19	Eph. 4:28
9. Do not lie about others.	Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20	Jas. 3:9-10
10. Be satisfied with what you have.	Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21	Luke 12:15

VII. DAVIDIC COVENANT

- A. David is to have a child, yet to be born, who shall succeed him and establish his kingdom (2 Sam. 7:11-12).
- B. This son (Solomon) shall build the temple instead of David (2 Sam. 7:13a).
- C. The throne of his kingdom shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7:13b).
- D. The throne will not be taken away from him (Solomon) even though his sins justify chastisement (2 Sam. 7:14-15).
- E. David's house, throne, and kingdom shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16).¹⁷

VIII. THE NEW COVENANT

A. Jeremiah 31:31-34

1. It is an unconditional covenant resting on the "I will" of God (Jer. 31:31-34).
2. It is an everlasting covenant (Isa. 61:2; cf. Ezek. 37:26; Jer. 31:35-37).
3. It promises the impartation of a renewed mind and heart which we call regeneration (Jer. 31:33, cf. Isa. 59:21).
4. Forgiveness of sin is also included in this covenant, "for I will remove their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34b).
5. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is also included. This is seen by comparing Jeremiah 31:33 with Ezekiel 36:27.
6. The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit will be manifested, and the will of God will be known by obedient hearts (Jer. 31:34).¹⁸
7. As is always the case when Israel is in the land, she will be blessed materially, and the will of God will be known by obedient hearts (Jer.31:34).
8. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is included (compare Jer. 31:33 with Ezek. 36:27).

B. Other Scriptures

1. It provides for the restoration to the favor and blessing of God (Hos. 2:19-20, cf. Isa. 61:9).
2. The sanctuary will be built in Jerusalem, for it is written "...will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle shall be with them (Ezek. 37:26-27a).
3. War will cease and peace shall reign according to Hosea 2:18. The fact that this is also a definite characteristic of the millennium (Isa. 2:4) further supports the fact that the new covenant is millennial in its fulfillment.
4. The blood of the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of all the blessings of the new covenant, for "by the blood of thy covenant I have set forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water" (Zech. 9:11).
5. Provides for restoration to the favor and blessing of God (Hos. 2:19-20, cf. Isa. 61:9).
6. Israel will be blessed materially when in its land (Jer. 32:41; Isa. 61:8; Ezek. 34:25-27).
7. The sanctuary will be rebuilt in Jerusalem (Ezek. 37:26-27a).
8. War will cease and peace shall reign according to Hosea 2:18.
9. The blood of the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of all the blessings of the new covenant (Zech. 9:11).

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End Notes

¹ Grenz, p. 32.

² Mounce, p.143.

³ Brown, Driver and Briggs, p. 136

⁴ Bavinck, p. 395.

⁵ Bavinck. P. 395.

⁶ The number of covenants in the Bible depends on whether one adheres strictly to the use of *berith*, or to the context of a pledge or promise being made.

⁷ Waltke, p. 94.

⁸ Waltke, p. 94.

⁹ Bob Deffenbaugh, *The Noahic Covenant—A New Beginning (Genesis 8:20-9:17)* <http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=69>.

¹⁰ "Nations" is to be interpreted as both a biological sense and a spiritual sense. Biological → Isaac and his descendants, the descendants of Keturah (25:1-4); Ishmael (25:12-18), Jacob)29:31—30:24, and Esau (36:1-43). Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 260.

¹¹ Pentecost, p. 97.

¹² Ellisen, p. 198.

¹³ Ferguson, p. 541.

¹⁴ S. Michael Houdmann, *What is the Purpose of the Mosaic law?* GotQuestions.org <<https://www.gotquestions.org/Mosaic-Law.html>>. Accessed March 6, 2020.

¹⁵ John Piper, *Why the Law was Given*; <<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-the-law-was-given>>. Accessed March 15, 2020.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:17 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_5:17>. Accessed March 15, 2020.

¹⁷ Pentecost, pp.101-102

¹⁸ Pentecost, pp.117-118