

A Biblical Theology of God: The God who Makes and Keeps Covenants

Modern contracts: negotiated by both parties, setting out what each will do. Sometimes sanctions/penalties if either side fails to 'supply the goods'
party 1 will work this number of hours, and party 2 will pay them.

Typically impersonal.

In the Ancient Near East = **covenants** eg those imposed by a superpower on a vassal:
Top down. The superpower promised to protect, the vassal to give allegiance and tax. If failed - serious consequences!

So, for that period, **a definition of covenant** could be:

Covenants bind two or more **parties** together by **promises, conditions, and sanctions**.

The Biblical covenants mirror those of the ANE. When God's involved, there's no negotiation. He writes the covenant.

But, in contrast to modern contracts, those involving God *are* highly personal they're about his relationship with humanity.

And all along, they are telling the story about how God is going to crush the serpent through the Seed of the woman, and choose and save a people to be his people.

Covenants in the Bible

God makes covenants with:

Adam -debatable/Covenant of Works

Noah

Abraham,

Israel (Mosaic),

Priests: Aaronic priesthood, - which we don't have time to look at.

David

God's people in Christ

God's Covenant with Noah

Context = increasing sin in the world.

Then, God says to Noah: "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark." (Gen 6:18) = first explicit mention of covenant in the Bible.

- It's God's initiative.

- There are no explicit promises, just instructions - get in the ark!

But the implicit promise is - come into the ark *and I will keep you safe*.

So in the very first covenant = implicit promise: out of judgement/death, God will bring life; through the water of cleansing/judgement God is saving the line of the Seed of woman, and a chosen people.

The covenant itself is in Genesis 8:20-9:17.

Promises:

Gen 9:8-11: "I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you... that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood."

Commands/conditions/obligations for Noah and his offspring to obey:

Gen 9:1,4-6: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth... You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."

So humanity's thinking should be directed to making life and preserving life.

Sacrifice precedes the covenant: Gen 8:20

The Sign of the covenant: Rainbow: Gen 9:13 - remember the rainbow!

The Covenant with Abraham

Genesis 12:1-3, is not really a covenant but a call and a promise - which God initiates. What follows is a covenant (whether 1 or 2 is debated).

The promises:

Genesis 15:5,16 - Innumerable offspring and land

Genesis 22:17-18: A seed/offspring will conquer his enemies and bless the whole world.

So, the Seed of the woman to crush the serpent, has been preserved through Noah and his line has been narrowed down to Abraham.

The obligations:

Genesis 17:1,10: blameless life and male circumcision, which becomes the sign of the covenant (17:11)

Sacrifice:

Gen 15:7-18 - the cutting of a covenant (Jer 34:18). But God alone passes through: whatever curses fall for Abraham's failure, will fall on God. Abraham is just a sleeping spectator!

And prior to the restatement of God's promises to Abraham in Gen 22, another sacrifice: The offering of Isaac - the beloved son, who is spared and God himself provides the sacrifice.

So, the promises of the Seed/Offspring of Abraham who will conquer his enemies, and bless the world are inaugurated through God promising to take the curse upon himself, and provide the sacrifice himself.

The Covenant with Israel

Exodus 2 tells us God remembers his covenant with Abraham, and appears to Moses and promises the people, "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God." (Ex 6:7).

And after the Exodus, at Sinai, God enters into covenant with the people.

Exodus 19:4-6:

Promises: They will be his special people, he will be their God

Obligations: They must obey his voice and keep his covenant

The documents of the covenant = the 10 commandments written in stone, and the Book of the Covenant - Ex 20-23 (24:7). Places in the ark of the covenant, in the Most Holy Place, in the centre of the camp of Israel. (Ex 25:16, 21; 34:28-29; 40:20-21).

This covenant was also inaugurated by **sacrifice**: Ex 24:3-8

The sign of the covenant = The sabbath - Ex 31:13-17

The Deuteronomic Covenant

Deut 29:1- before entering the Promised Land, the new generation had to commit themselves to the original Mosaic covenant. In addition, a new promise: 'The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart.' (Deut 30:6). Anticipates the **new covenant** of changed hearts.

The Covenant with David

In 2 Samuel 7 the word *covenant* is not used, but *hesed* - God's covenant love - is.

2 Sam 7:9-16

Promises

- a great name: 7:9;
- Victory over enemies 7:11
- Promise of land and a kingdom
- Special relationship with God 7:14
- Special Seed/Offspring: 7:12-16

Obligations

- Descendants must keep God's laws: 7:14

It is very similar to the promises made to Abraham: So... the promises to Noah, Abraham, and Israel are being focused on the line of David.(Gen 12:2; 17:7-8; 21:12; 22:17)

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the one place in the OT that explicitly mentions the NC.

There is continuity and discontinuity with what has gone before:

Similar:

- the place of God's law - his torah
- Offspring (= the house of Israel)
- I will be their God and they will be my people

Different:

- the complete removal of sin
- the inner transformation of heart
- intimate relationship with God

Isaiah makes explicit that this new covenant will not be restricted to ethnic Israel but all nations will be included - through the role of YHWH's Servant

Isaiah 42:6: "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open eyes that are blind."

The New Covenant and the New Testament

The New Testament begins: Matt 1:1 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, *the son of David, the son of Abraham.*'

The Seed, the offspring of Abraham and of David has come. Victory over his enemies and world wide blessing is coming!

the New Covenant inaugurated: Through the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" - 1 Cor 11:25 Luke 22:20.

So in fulfilment of Gen 15 and Gen 22: the Lord takes the curse upon himself; he provides the sacrifice and it's not Isaac, it's *his* beloved Son.

Changed hearts: John 3: you must be born again; Col 2 - hearts circumcised by faith in Christ.

Acts:

The church is described as heirs of the covenant promises and 'sons... of the covenant' - the church is the true Israel of faith. (Acts 2:30,39; 3:25; 15:14-17)

Paul's letters

Paul explains how

- The fulfilment of the promise to Abraham comes through the gospel (Rom 4:16-19)

- 'It is those of faith [in Christ] who are the [true] sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7); and 'Abraham's offspring' (Gal 3:29).
- That God's covenant purposes for ethnic Israel are fulfilled in the genuine heirs of the covenant = Abraham's spiritual descendants, Jew or Gentile. (Rom 9-11; cf Eph 2:11-22).
- So 'all Israel will be saved': those who like Abraham, Jew or Gentile, have the faith of Abraham. (Rom 11:26)
- That instead of the promise of the land being limited to geographical Israel, those who believe in Christ are heirs of the renewed world (Rom 4:13; 8:17-25)
- And all this is possible because the NC changes our hearts, circumcises them, cutting us off from our sin, just as God promised he would (Col 2:9-12).
- And it is Christ who bears the curse of the old covenant for us (Gal 3:13)

Hebrews

The New Covenant is a/the major theme. The Writer quotes Jeremiah's passage about the new covenant twice (Heb 8:8-12 and 10:16-17)

He contrasts the new with the old: the new has better promises, a better sacrifice, a better mediator, better blessings and a better inheritance.

Revelation

The Bible ends with **Revelation**

Revelation 4: around God's throne is a rainbow. Right in the middle of heaven is the sign: the God who makes covenants keeps them.

Revelation 7: Great crowd that no one could number - from every nation. God has kept his promise to Abraham of innumerable offspring and a world blessed.

Revelation 11:19: the heavenly temple is opened: the ark of the covenant is in heaven.

Revelation 21:3: and the New Jerusalem coming out of heaven. John hears the voice from the throne: 'Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.'

The whole point of all the covenants: that God is calling a people from all nations to himself has been fulfilled. The Seed of the woman, through Noah, the Seed of Abraham, through Israel, the seed of David has triumphed. And he did it by taking the curse upon himself and sacrificing himself.