

Old Testament Covenants

Operation Teaching Tools

Prepared by Kevin Sneed

I. Introduction

- A. God has chosen to interact with humanity through covenants. F. Charles Fensham writes that “covenant was the vehicle that [gave] expression to the relationship between the Lord and his people since the time of the patriarchs.”¹
- B. In the Old Testament we see five major covenants that establish what we now call the Old Covenant. These covenants include:²
 - 1. The Common Grace Covenants
 - i. The Adamic Covenant (Creation Covenant)
 - ii. The Noahic Covenant (Recreation Covenant)
 - 2. The Special Grace Covenants
 - i. Abrahamic Covenant
 - ii. Mosaic Covenant (Sinai Covenant)
 - iii. Davidic Covenant

II. Understand Biblical Covenants

- A. In many discussions of Biblical covenants, we find that some writers prefer to describe Biblical covenants as taking the pattern of ancient Mesopotamian style covenants. Old Testament writers, they say, described God’s interaction with humanity in the familiar terms of a suzerain-vassal covenant.
 - 1. A suzerain vassal covenant is where a superior king or nation (the Suzerain) establishes a binding agreement with the lesser king or nation (the vassal) for mutual benefit. Such agreements were viewed as an act of mercy on the part of the Suzerain towards the vassals.
 - 2. Suzerain-Vassal covenants contain these elements (note that not all the Biblical covenants strictly follow this pattern):
 - i. Identity of the Suzerain
 - ii. Historical Prologue (history of relationship)
 - iii. Regulations and Stipulations (the responsibilities of the vassal to the suzerain and the suzerain to the vassal)
 - iv. Promises and Guarantees
 - v. Witnesses
 - vi. Blessings and Curses
- B. Jeffrey Niehaus writes that a “covenant is an expression of God’s nature as a great suzerain who provides good things for his vassals, who imparts standards for their way of life, who will bless them for obedience and curse them for disobedience, and who is the eternal witness to these facts. . . . On such an understanding we affirm that, from the beginning, God has been in covenant with all creation.”³
- C. This model has been helpful in understanding the form and function of Biblical covenants but more recent evangelical scholarship has taken a slightly different approach. Rather than assuming that the Biblical writers conveyed the initiatives of God in human, suzerain-

¹ F. Charles Fensham, *NICNT: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 17.

² Here I am using the terminology most recently put forward and described by Jeffrey Niehaus in *Biblical Theology Volume 1*.

³ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Biblical Theology: Volume 1* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book, 2014), p. 37-38.

vassal treaty forms, we should rather assume that human suzerain-vassal treaty forms were created as an imitation of God's own covenant communication. Thus, covenant is not simply the method that human writers chose to convey God's message, covenant originated with God as his select method of communication and interaction with humanity. This method of interacting through a covenant relationship was subsequently adopted and imitated by humans when they sought to form agreements and contracts with each other. The covenant concept was developed firstly in the heart of God and not merely in the minds of man.

- D. The prevalence of covenant language in the Old Testament is not simply the result of Old Testament writers employing human concepts to convey God's message. Rather, the concept of covenant originated with God even before the Biblical writers wrote. The covenant concept was expressed to the world through God's own initiative with creation and later imitated in secular human governments and agreements. Though some disagree with this assessment, this is not a far-fetched argument considering that many of our own laws and customs today are modeled after the laws and practices originally conveyed by God in the Old Testament.
- E. In summary, the concept of a covenant in Scripture was not borrowed from pagan cultures but originated in the heart of God as his exclusive means of engaging with humanity. This is an expression of God's genuine love towards us. God could have rightfully engaged with humanity in a number of less beneficial ways. He was not obligated to make covenants with humanity but he chose to do so for our benefit.

III. The Adamic Covenant (Creation Covenant)

A. Scripture: Genesis 1-2

B. Contents

1. Describes the special relationship between God and humanity.
 - i. Creation is an act of grace. God created mankind, and the world to sustain mankind, not out of necessity but out of love. God created us to experience his love and worship him.
 - ii. Although mankind was created last, being made in God's image shows that mankind was not the least in creation but the pinnacle of creation.
2. Establishes the way of life intended by God.
 - i. Love/Relationship
 - ii. Trust
 - iii. Obedience
3. Illustrates the free will with which man was created.
 - i. Able to make decisions
 - ii. Free from sin but also able to sin. Not sinning was to be the result of a genuine choice, not a forced action.

C. Major Issue in the Creation Covenant

1. The Creation of Humanity

- i. Created by God
 - a. Formed from the dust of the ground (finite beings).
 - b. Received the breath of life directly from God breathing into him. (Genesis 2:7).
- ii. Described as Existing in the Image of God (Imago Dei)
 - a. This means humans are not only material creature but also spiritual beings.
 - b. This characteristic describes the possibility for relationship with God and special worship of and interaction with the Creator.

- c. This make human beings of greater value than any other part of creation.
 - d. Humans are representatives of God in creation. Humans are not gods, but God has entrusted humanity with his image to represent God both in testimony and action.
 - 1. An image reflects the original.
 - 2. Humans were given the responsibility to rule over creation from God, the ultimate ruler of all.
 - 3. Humans were given the ability and responsibility to produce life from God, the ultimate life giver. We were also given the task of preserving life as caretakers of the garden (God's creation).
 - 4. Our presence on the earth is for God's glory.
 - e. Sin marred the image of God in humanity but redemption (in the New Testament) has renewed the possibility of living as God intended humanity to live. Thus, Christian maturity includes (by necessity) growing more into the image of God and increasingly reflecting God. Persistent resistance to the image of God to which we were created and called to live is sin. When Adam and Eve acted in a way contrary to God's nature, they lived outside the image of God and broke their covenant with God.
- iii. Possessing Free Will
- a. Genesis 2:16-17
 - b. We have the power to choose and make decisions.
 - c. We are able to sin.
2. Humanity in Covenant Relationship with God
- i. Free from sin and its corruption
 - ii. Free to have unhindered relationship with God.
 - iii. Free from Death
 - iv. Special Dominion over the Earth
 - a. Mankind was given special dominion or authority over the animals as seen in man's power to name the animals (Genesis 2:19).
 - b. Animals did not harm or attack mankind (Genesis 2:19; 3:15)
 - c. Mankind was given special dominion or authority over the land as seen in man's power to live in and from the garden which he worked (Genesis 2:19).
 - v. Able to work and not grow tired (Genesis 3:17-19).
 - vi. Women Had Painless Childbirth (Genesis 3:16)
3. Humanity in Broken Covenant Relationship with God (Genesis 3)
- i. Guilt and Shame (Genesis 3:7-10)
 - ii. Separation from God (Genesis 3:8)
 - iii. Fear (Genesis 3:10)
 - iv. Death (Genesis 2:17)
 - a. Immediate Spiritual Death (Ephesians 2:1-3)
 - b. Eventual Physical Death
 - v. Punishment
 - a. Women
 - 1. Pain in childbirth
 - 2. Loss of independence
 - b. Men

1. Pain in Work
2. Must Toil for Sustenance
- c. Universal Consequences
 1. The fall and corruption of the whole human race. Sin nature (original sin) is passed on to all people and thus, all people have desires to sin.
 2. Humanity continues to exist as God's condemned enemies and separated from God until we find redemption and salvation. Humanity is aware of that broken relationship and feels the need for personal forgiveness and restoration.

D. Lasting Significance

1. Explains the origin of all creation and the original intention of God:
 - i. God is the source of all creation.
 - ii. Creation was designed to support humanity and humanity was created to be in a loving relationship with God.
2. Illustrates the inadequacies of life lived out of harmony and relationship (covenant) with God. See Hosea 6:7 and Romans 5:12-21.
3. Illustrates the mercy of God. God's mercy is not just New Testament concept. Sometime we call the Old Covenants the "covenant of works" and the New Covenant the "covenant of grace." Yet we see from the very beginning how God has always acted with mercy and grace towards his creation. The special grace we enjoy now is made available by Jesus yet mercy and grace were extended by God to all people beginning with Adam and Eve.

IV. The Noahic Covenant (Recreation Covenant)

A. Scripture:

1. Genesis 8:15 - 9:17
2. Genesis 6-8 also shows God both affirming the Adamic Covenant and preparing the Noahic Covenant.

B. Contents

1. This covenant demonstrates God's desire and commitment to redeem humanity and all creation.
2. Affirms the role of humanity to be God's representatives on the earth.

C. Major Issues in the Covenant

1. Similarity with the Adamic Covenant:
 - i. Both the Adamic and Noahic Covenants were made between God and the seed of humanity.
 - a. Adam and Eve were the seed of all humans before the fall.
 - b. Noah's family was the seed of all humanity after the fall.
 - ii. Similar in language – even some direct quotes from the Creation/Adamic Covenant can be found in the Recreation/Noahic Covenant.
2. Covenant Soon Broken
 - i. Just as we saw in the original Adamic covenant, the Noahic covenant is soon followed by human disobedience and covenant breaking behavior.
 - a. Genesis 9:20-23
 - b. Genesis 11:1-9
 - ii. Humanity progresses deeper into sin and disobedience in spite of God's salvation and covenant renewal.

D. Lasting Significance

1. The entire incident illustrates God's attitude toward sin. Even though God is committed to redemption, God hates sin. We need to hold these two in balance: God's hatred of sin and God's commitment to human redemption.
2. God's love for life and the value he places on life is a recurrent theme in both the Creation covenant and the Noahic covenant. This will continue to be revealed in the unfolding of the Old Testament.
3. The rainbow (which often appears after a rain) serves as a everlasting reminder of God's eternal promise.

V. The Abrahamic Covenant

A. Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27

B. Contents:

1. God will give Abraham a direct descendant and innumerable future descendants.
2. God will raise up the descendants of Abraham into a great nation.
3. God will give the descendants of Abraham the land of Canaan for their homeland.
4. God will protect the descendants of Abraham.
5. God will use the descendants of Abraham to bless the whole of humanity and creation.

C. Major Issues in the Covenant

1. Particular rather than General

- i. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God's immediate focus narrows from all humanity to a choice human.
 - a. With Adam and Noah, God made a covenant that generally included all humanity.
 - b. With Abraham, God made a covenant that was that particular and included only Abraham and his descendants.
- ii. In God's mind, all humanity would be impacted by this covenant, but not all humanity would be directly bound to the covenant. The universal blessing would not require all humanity to adhere to the covenant but only the descendants of Abraham. Humanity would be blessed if Abraham's descendants kept the covenant. The Covenant was immediately applicable to Abraham but would be eventually beneficial to all mankind.

2. The Role of Faith

- i. In each of the three passages that describe the Abrahamic Covenant, God places emphasis on Abraham's faith – his belief and trust in God:
 - a. In Genesis 12, God asks Abraham to demonstrate his faith by leaving his country and going to a strange and unknown place. Abraham obeyed, but more importantly, Abraham has the faith to believe and trust before he made the first step.
 - b. In Genesis 15, Abraham was challenged by God to trust God for a descendant. Abraham had the promise of a child and a nation yet as Abraham grew old, neither came to pass. In a moment of exasperation, he expressed his concern to God but still chose to believe "and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). This became a key verse for Paul in his understanding and explanation of salvation by faith in the New Testament.
 - c. In Genesis 17, Abraham started the tradition of circumcision not only as a sign of God's covenant, but also as a demonstration of his faith in God's ability to keep his promise in spite of seemingly impossible circumstances. Abraham's faith wavered and Ishmael was born as a product of sin. However, Abraham reaffirmed his faith

by practicing circumcision and later by being willing to sacrifice Isaac to God (Hebrews 11:11-19).

- ii. Faith is not only a New Testament concept. Faith has always been the means by which God desired humanity to respond to his initiatives. God has always looked for humanity to respond (and obey) by faith.
 - a. In the Adamic Covenant, Adam and Eve demonstrated faith by not eating the forbidden fruit. A rejection of faith led to disobedience and breaking the covenant.
 - b. In the Noahic Covenant, Noah demonstrated faith by building the ark. His family demonstrated faith by repopulating the earth. Their lack of faith resulted in God's plan not being fulfilled and the covenant being broken once more.
 - c. In the Abrahamic covenant, the role of faith becomes even more clear.
 - 1. Obedience is not an alternative to faith, obedience is the fruit of faith. Abraham was able and willing to obey because he has faith and believed.
 - 2. Disobedience reveals a lack of faith.
 - d. In covenant relationship with God, God is primarily concerned with our faith in him. Works can (and should) demonstrate our faith but we are not judged by the amount of works we accomplish but rather by the faith (trust and belief) we possess.

D. Lasting Significance

- 1. Establishes the chosen people of God.
 - i. God called the children of Abraham (later called Israel) out of all the people and nations of the world to be his special people.
 - ii. Israel would receive special treatment, blessings, and knowledge from God but it was for the purpose of serving and representing God (called a kingdom of priests - Exodus 19:6) and blessing all peoples as promised from the very beginning of the Abrahamic Covenant.
 - iii. Israel generally failed to live out the purpose for which it was called and set apart (as did humanity in the earlier covenants). Eventually, however, this covenant and calling would be fulfilled by and through Jesus.
- 2. The remainder of the Old Testament will continue to follow the story of Abraham's descendants.
 - i. Israel, now set apart, will be the primary people group of the Old Testament.
 - ii. The remaining Old Testament covenants will be made with Abraham's descendants.
- 3. God reveals more of His plan for redemption.
 - i. As we saw above, Abraham's descendants would become a key component in God's plan to redeem all humanity and creation.
 - ii. The plan of God becomes clearer and looks forward to fulfillment when the covenant with Abraham is made.
 - iii. Christopher Wright summarizes that God's choice of Abraham and his descendants (Israel) was not "a rejection of the nations but explicitly for their ultimate benefit."⁴

VI. The Mosaic Covenant (sometimes called the Sinai Covenant)

⁴ The Mission of God, 329.

A. Scripture:

1. Main Texts: Exodus 19-24; Deuteronomy 4-30
2. Much of the material in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy is covenantal material

B. Contents:

1. The observation that God had kept his promises from the Abrahamic Covenant.
2. The expectations of God for Israel as they prepared to enter into the promised land and set up their geographical and political nation. The expanded descriptions of God's Law.

C. Major Issues in the Mosaic Covenant

1. Establishment of the Sacrificial System (Leviticus 1-10)

- i. Sacrifice was involved in every covenant:
 - a. Genesis 3:21 in the Adamic Covenant
 - b. Genesis 8:20 in the Noahic Covenant
 - c. Genesis 15:9-10
- ii. However, only in the Mosaic Covenant do we see the full description and necessity of animal sacrifices.
- iii. Animal sacrifice was instituted in anticipation of humanity breaking the law of God and disrupting covenant relationship with God. God gave Israel a temporary remedy for sin. The blood of certain slaughtered animals could provide for up to one year of atonement. In light of Israel's habitual sin, he sacrificial system was continuous and necessary for all the people.

2. Established the Temple

- i. A temple, or dedicated place of worship, was foreshadowed in the Adamic Covenant like animal sacrifices. Eden, the garden, was the temple.
- ii. In the Mosaic Covenant, God instructed Israel to build first a mobile tabernacle and eventually a permanent temple where the presence of God could dwell among the people.
- iii. God desired not only to be in relationship with his covenant people but also to be in community (dwell among) his covenant people.
- iv. However, because of sin, certain barriers did exist between God and the people even though God dwelled in their midst:
 - a. Priests were designated to be intermediaries between the people and God. Because of sin, people rarely interacted directly with God.
 - b. Physical barriers were established in the temple to make known the spiritual reality that sinful humanity could not enter the presence of God. Only one person, once in a year, could cross the barrier and stand directly in the presence of God on behalf of Israel.

3. Established the Nation of Israel

- i. God promised that Israel will conquer and occupy the Promised Land. The covenant promises and provides a plan for taking the Promised Land.
- ii. Although Israel still had to struggle for their promised land, the giving of this covenant both anticipates the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant for the nation and prepares the people to form and administer the nation.
- iii. The nation of Israel continued to develop and change politically but the Law of God would form the foundation of the nation's laws and mission.
- iv. There is a strong connection between the land, the covenant, and the law which is stressed in Deuteronomy. However, the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant are conditional on obedience to the Old Testament law. Deuteronomy stresses

that obedience to the covenant will bring about blessing but disobedience will bring about curses.

4. Established the Law of Israel

- i. 613 individual laws were given including the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17) as a summary of the laws and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) as the heart of God behind the laws.
- ii. The laws addressed all aspects of Jewish life including:
 - a. Civil Responsibilities (community life)
 - b. Religious Practices (spiritual life)
 - c. Morals and Ethics (personal life)
- iii. Legal Categories:
 - a. The “civil” laws applied to the government of the nation of Israel, this was the country’s legal system.
 - b. The “ceremonial” laws applied to the religion of Israel (before Jesus). These laws addressed temple worship, priests, sacrifices, festivals and other aspects of the Jewish religion. Many of these laws were fulfilled in Christ.
 - c. The “moral” laws conveyed the universal principles of God, how God expected his people to behave in local community and in the greater world.
- iv. Each Old Testament law (moral, civil, and ceremonial) contains a universal truth that is applicable to all of God’s people, everywhere, at all times. Even though we do not follow the specific law today, we are responsible to consider and uphold the Godly principle or motivation behind the law. The law reveals the heart of the lawmaker.
- v. The 10 Commandments serve as an introduction or summary of the Law:
 - a. The first four commandments address man’s relationship with God.
 - b. The last six commandments address man’s relationship with other people.

D. Lasting Significance

1. Demonstrated to Israel and the world that human effort alone is not enough to stand righteous before God.
 - i. Generations of Jews attempted to obey the Law of God for centuries yet they did not produce even one person who perfectly kept God’s commands (Psalm 53:1-3; Romans 3:10-12; Hebrews 10:1-4).
 - ii. Israel produced many people of faith (Hebrews 11) but no perfect people . . . until Jesus (who was not actually the product of Israel but came into the world through the line of Israel).
2. Provides the most extensive Old Testament picture into the heart of God. Although the Covenant at Sinai is viewed today through the lens of the New Covenant, it provides an abundance of insight into God’s standards for his people.

VII. The Davidic Covenant

A. Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:8-29

B. Contents:

1. Promise to establish an eternal kingdom of Israel
2. Promise that David’s descendant will rule on the throne of Israel forever.

C. Major Issues in the Covenant

1. The exaltation of the line of David.
 - i. Although Saul was the first king of Israel, God promised that his family would to continue to rule (1 Samuel 15:10-11; 17-29). David was chosen

- and became the favored king of Israel and God promised that David's descendants would always be attached to the throne (rule) of Israel.
- ii. Although David had sinned (2 Samuel 11), his humility was a better response than Saul's arrogance. Thus, God put an end to Saul's line and forever anointed David's line.
 - a. Saul's arrogance – 1 Samuel 13:8-13
 - b. David's humility - 2 Samuel 12:13-17

2. Clear Description of God the Father

- i. Although the common use of Father as a title for God does not arise until the New Testament, here we see a clear indication that God does want to be identified as Father.
- ii. God promises to be in relationship with the line of David as a father is in relationship with his son. This includes both:
 - a. unconditional love (blessing)
 - b. unwavering righteousness (discipline)
- iii. David uses this father/son language in the Psalms
 - a. Psalm 2:7
 - b. Psalm 68:5
 - c. Psalm 103:13

D. Lasting Significance

1. Gives Israel Hope

- i. David's son Solomon would enjoy a glorious reign over Israel as it prospered under his rule but Israel would soon be headed for division, disobedience, and destruction.
- ii. As Israel suffered under defeat and foreign rule, the promise of God to David would provide hope that God would redeem Israel once again.
- iii. The David Covenant opened the way for the promise and expectation of the Messiah:
 - a. Isaiah 11:1-9
 - b. Jeremiah 33:17-22

2. Looks forward to Jesus – this is continued and expanded by the prophets.

VIII. The Old Testament Pattern of People in Covenant with God (see diagram below)

