

## **WEEK 3 | THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS**

As we discussed last week, one of the critical issues in eschatology is how one views the Biblical covenants, their interrelationships, and the nature of their fulfillment. As we continue to develop our framework for understanding Biblical prophecy, we will now turn to a close study of the Biblical covenants.

### **WHAT IS A COVENANT**

O. Palmer Robertson has famously described a covenant as “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.”<sup>1</sup> A covenant is an agreement between two parties—either individuals (Gen 21:22-34) or nations (Ex 23:23-33)—that binds them together with common interests and obligations. Covenants were often made between a superior and inferior party and could be either conditional or unconditional.

A conditional covenant was a bilateral agreement in which both parties committed to fulfill certain obligations; both parties were responsible for fulfilling the covenant. An unconditional covenant, on the other hand, was an agreement in which the responsibility for fulfillment fell entirely upon the superior party. Blessings were included for the party that fulfilled their covenant obligations, while curses were promised should those obligations not be met and the covenant broken.

### **THE NOAHIC COVENANT**

The Noahic Covenant is found at the close of the flood narrative in Genesis 9:8-17.

#### **PARTIES**

The Noahic covenant is a pact made by God “between me and you and every living creature of all flesh” (9:15). Thus, this covenant includes all living things, both man and animals (9:9-10).

#### **PROMISES**

God promised, “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” In short, God promised that He would never again respond to human sin by destroying all life through a flood. There remains a day of final

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<sup>1</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 4.

judgment, but, until then, humanity is promised a secure presence on this earth. Many scholars have argued that this covenant sets the stage for the redemptive story of Scripture by ensuring humanity's continued presence on the earth despite its persistent sin.

## NATURE

As the text makes clear, no conditions are placed on mankind or any living creature for the fulfillment of this covenant. Three times God promises He will “never” again flood the earth. His covenant is made “for all future generations” (9:12) and is an “everlasting covenant” (9:16).

## SIGN

The sign of the covenant is the rainbow, the “bow. . . in the clouds.” God promises that when He sees this sign He will “remember the everlasting covenant” (9:16) He has made with creation.

## **THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT**

The Abrahamic Covenant is laid out in a series of texts in the book of Genesis, with several subsequent reaffirmations made to Abraham, his Isaac, and his grandson Jacob (Israel).

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Genesis 13:14-17

<sup>14</sup> The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, <sup>15</sup> for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup> I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup> Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

Genesis 15:17-21

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the Lord made a **covenant** with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, <sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Genesis 17:1-8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, <sup>2</sup> that I may make my **covenant** between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “Behold, my **covenant** is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish my **covenant** between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting **covenant**, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

## PARTIES

A covenant made between God and Abraham, along with Abraham’s descendants.

## PROMISES

- Personal Blessings → Abraham
  - A great name (12:2)
  - Success & Prosperity (12:2, 3)
    - Livestock (13:2)
    - Victory in battle (14:1-24)
    - Sons (16:15; 21:22-23; 25:1-4)
    - “And the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things” (24:1)
    - Personal blessing promised to Isaac (26:3) and Jacob (28:15)

- National Blessings → Abraham’s Offspring
  - Numerous offspring (13:16; 15:5; 17:2, 5-6)
  - Greatness (12:2; 17:19, 21)
  - Royalty & Kingdom (17:6)
  - Land of Canaan (12:7; 13:15; 15:18-21; 17:8)
  
- International Blessings → The Nations
  - Blessing through the Abraham and his offspring (12:3; 18:18-19)
  - Reiterated to Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14)
  - Ultimately fulfilled by a singular “seed” of Abraham (22:18)

## NATURE

The passages above appear to place clear obligations upon Abraham for the fulfillment of the covenant. Abraham is commanded to:

- “go” (12:1)
- “arise and walk to and fro” (13:17)
- “look and count” (15:5)
- “take” (15:9)
- “walk” (17:1)
- “take” (22:2)

Abraham and his offspring are commanded to submit to circumcision in order to participate in the covenant (17:9-14). Additionally, God says to Abraham that He will fulfill His covenant promises because of Abraham’s obedience (22:18; 26:5). These considerations appear to make the covenant conditional in nature—conditional, that is, upon Abraham’s obedience.

However, there is much evidence that would indicate the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional. For one, all the commands God made to Abraham were immediately met; thus, if these were, indeed, “conditions,” then they have already been met.

Second, and significantly, is the covenant ratification ceremony narrated in Genesis 15. Typically, both parties of the covenant would pass between the animals and take bilateral responsibility for fulfilling its stipulations and obligations. In Genesis 15, however, God causes a deep sleep to come upon Abraham so that God, and He alone, walks between the animal halves. By doing this, God assumes full responsibility for fulfilling the covenant; no conditions placed upon Abraham.

Third, Scripture repeatedly describes the covenant and the promises of the covenant as “everlasting.” The Hebrew *olam* has the idea of “in perpetuity,” the strongest expression for eternity available in the Hebrew language.

- Gen 13:15 – “for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring **forever**.”
- Gen 17:7-8, 13, 19 – And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an **everlasting** covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an **everlasting** possession, and I will be their God”. . . So shall my covenant be in your flesh an **everlasting** covenant. . . God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an **everlasting** covenant for his offspring after him.
- 1 Chron 16:16-17 – the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, <sup>17</sup> which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an **everlasting** covenant. . .
- Psa 105:9-10 (see above)
- Jer 31:35-36 – Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar the Lord of hosts is his name: <sup>36</sup> “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me **forever**.”

As you can see, there is abundant evidence that the Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional covenant in which God alone has taken upon himself the obligation of its fulfillment. What, then, do we make of the apparent conditions set upon it? As Benware explains,

If an individual in the covenant relationship chose not to ‘walk before the Lord,’ they would lose out on the benefits and blessings of the covenant. That is a critical distinction to keep in mind. Sin and disobedience would cause the loss of the covenant blessings but would never cancel the covenant. The blessings of the covenant were indeed conditioned on the obedience of an individual. But the complete and final fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant depends on God alone. He intends to fulfill this covenant even if his people Israel are not faithful and obedient.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 43.

This becomes all the more clear in later reaffirmations of the covenant, many given in the context of Israel's unfaithfulness:

- Deut 9:5-6 – Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land. . . <sup>6</sup>“Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.
- 2 Kings 13:23 – But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now.
- Micah 7:18, 20 – Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. . . <sup>20</sup> You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

The author of the book of Hebrews describe the oath of God as an “unchangeable” thing employed by God “to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose” (Heb 6:17-18). The Abrahamic Covenant, then, is an unconditional covenant made between God and Abraham in which God, the superior party, has taken upon Himself full responsibility for its fulfillment.

## SIGN

The sign of the covenant is circumcision, a physical procedure meant to identify all members of the covenant community (Genesis 17:1-14).

## SIGNIFICANCE

The Abrahamic covenant is the foundational covenant made between God and Israel. All subsequent covenants—the Mosaic, Levitical, Deuteronomic, Palestinian, Davidic, and New—are all particular outworkings of some detail of the Abrahamic covenant.

Importantly, subsequent covenants cannot nullify a previously made covenant OR change the terms of that covenant, a point Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:15, writing, “To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.” Thus, while the covenants made subsequent to the Abrahamic covenant add to, clarify, and reiterate the promises made to Abraham, they do not in any way change, nullify, or abrogate any part of that covenant. This is especially important to keep in mind, especially in

regards to how we understand the New covenant and how the church relates to Israel and the covenants made to Israel. The figure<sup>3</sup> below shows how each covenant builds on and clarifies various aspects of the Abrahamic covenant:

| THE ISRAELITE COVENANTS |                                 |                                 |                     |                     |                     |                      |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                         | ABRAHAMIC                       | MOSAIC                          | PRIESTLY            | DEUTERON-OMIC       | DAVID               | NEW                  |
| THEMES                  | NATION                          | NATION                          | Nations             | Nation              | Nation              | NATION               |
|                         | SEED                            |                                 |                     |                     | SEED                |                      |
|                         | LAND                            | Land                            | LAND                | LAND                | Land                |                      |
|                         | BLESSING (Spiritual & Material) | BLESSING (Spiritual & Material) | BLESSING (Material) | BLESSING (Material) | BLESSING (Material) | BLESSING (Spiritual) |
|                         | KINGDOM                         | Kingdom                         | Kingdom             |                     | KINGDOM             | Kingdom              |

## THE MOSAIC COVENANT

The Mosaic, or Sinaitic, Covenant is detailed in Exodus 19-24. The importance of these chapters in Biblical theology can hardly be overstated:

There is no way to describe adequately the canonical implications of Exodus 19-24. Everyone from Moses (Deut 5:6-21), to Jeremiah (Jer 7:1-15), to Jesus (Matt 5-7), to Peter (1 Pet 2:9), and every other Biblical writer who has anything to say about covenant, morality and relationship with God reflects directly or indirectly on this passage.<sup>4</sup>

Since it spans so many chapters, we will be zooming in on pertinent passages as we look at its various aspects below.

### PARTIES

The Mosaic Covenant is a pact made between God and the newly established nation of Israel, the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) that were redeemed out of Egypt. God says to Abraham:

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced from William D. Barrick, "The Mosaic Covenant," *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 220.

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1998), 117.

This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now if you obey me fully and keep my **covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup> you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”  
– Exodus 19:3b-6

This newly formed nation would be both the recipient of the national promises of the Abrahamic covenant and the vehicle through which the national promises would be mediated.

## PROMISES

The blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience tied to this covenant are stipulated most clearly in Deuteronomy 27-28 (cf. Ex 23:20-23; Lev 26).

## NATURE

The Mosaic covenant closely resembles a suzerainty treaty, a type of pact that would have been familiar to the people of Israel given their ANE context. A conquering king, the *Suzerain*, would institute a covenant meant to govern the lives of his new subjects. The covenant would specify the obligations of the subjects or vassals to their king, as well as the blessings and curses promised for their obedience or disobedience. Thus, the Mosaic covenant appears to be conditional in nature.

The Mosaic covenant related to Israel in a particular way:

In order to receive the promised blessings contained in the Abrahamic Covenant, Israel would have to obey the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant. In other words, obedience to the Mosaic Covenant would be the means by which Israelites would manifest their faith in the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Jas 2:14-26). The nation did not need the law to be freed from their bondage; they were freed from their bondage that they might live for God in the midst of the crooked and perverse Gentile nations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” 225.



The Mosaic covenant was legal revelation that synthesized with the promissory revelation of the Abrahamic covenant. The Law “was added because of transgressions” (Gal 3:19) it would be the means by which God would enable His chosen people to maintain their distinctiveness in the midst of the pagan nations that surrounded them. In other words, the law was given to make Israel fit for receiving the promises of the Abrahamic covenant; those promises were not conditional or dependent, however, on Israel keeping the law.

While disobedience to the Mosaic covenant brought with it serious consequences and would lead to the temporary loss of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, it did not (and could not) in any way change or nullify its character. It remained an unconditional and eternal covenant, the fulfillment of which rested on God alone. Thus, all the promises of the Abrahamic will certainly come to pass (cf. Gal 3:17-18).

It was impossible that the law should conflict with grace or hold it back. It is true that gross disobedience of the Mosaic covenant as well as blatant unbelief did in effect suspend the temporal and local enjoyment of covenant blessings. Still, the overall providential grace of God was unaffected. On the higher divine plane, whatever discipline fell upon His people came from the hands of Jehovah as a discipline of grace. When concrete manifestations of grace were thus suspended, it was possible to reverse the situation by repentance, confession, and supplication on the ground of immutable divine grace alone apart from any merit of law.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE DEUTERONOMIC COVENANT**

As an elaboration of the land promise aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the Deuteronomic (or Palestinian) covenant deals with the promised land and enlarges the revealed details of that promise.

### **PARTIES**

In Deuteronomy 29:1 Moses notes that his words in Deuteronomy are “the words of the covenant that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb.” Thus, this covenant is, like the Mosaic covenant, a pact between God and the nation of Israel—in this case, the second

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<sup>6</sup> Hoyt Chester Woodring Jr., “Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, DTS, 1956), 197.

generation (the first generation having perished in the wilderness for their unbelief). However, this pact was also extended to future generations of Israelites (Deut 29:14-15).

## PROMISES

This covenant, made on the plains of Moab just outside the Promised Land, was preparatory for the nation of Israel as she prepared for a war of conquest. In many ways, it is a reiteration of the Mosaic covenant to a new generation of Israelites, with a particular emphasis on the land about to be conquered and the need for fidelity to Yahweh. Thus, the blessings and curses are laid clearly laid out in chapters 27 and 28, with expulsion from the land being one of the many consequences for disobedience.

## NATURE

As an enlargement of the land aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, it shares the nature of that covenant and is also unconditional. This can be seen in Deuteronomy 30:1-6 where Moses tells the nation of Israel,

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>3</sup> then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. <sup>5</sup> And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. <sup>6</sup> And 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 and with all your soul, that you may live.

Despite Israel's disobedience and expulsion from the land, God prophesied through Moses of a future repentance and return to the Lord, bringing with it the blessings of life in the Promised Land for the nation of Israel.

## **THE DAVIDIC COVENANT**

The seventh chapter of 2 Samuel narrates the institution of the Davidic covenant as well as David's worshipful response. The Davidic covenant is also an extension of the Abrahamic covenant, with a particular focus on the promise of seed.

## PARTIES

The Davidic covenant, as its name suggests, is a pact instituted by God between Him and His chosen king, David. Speaking through the prophet Nathan, God commands him, "thus you shall say to my servant David" (7:8). The made with David, it involves his offspring as well, for God promises that after David's death, "I will raise up your offspring after you" (7:12). Throughout the Biblical narrative there has been a narrowing of the line of promise:

- God promised Abraham that he would have a son through Sarah his wife and that "nations" and "kings" would come from him (Gen 17).
- Ishmael was set aside and the promise was limited to Isaac.
- Esau was set aside and the promise was limited to Jacob (Israel).
- The line was narrowed further to Judah, from whom "The scepter shall not depart" (Gen 49:10).
- Now, that line is narrowed down to David and his offspring.

This, it will be through David and his offspring that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant will come to fruition.

## PROMISES

In this covenant God promises to David:

- A great name (7:9)
- Rest from his enemies (7:11)
- His house will last forever (7:11)
- His throne will be established forever (7:13)
- His kingdom will never pass away (7:15)

Thus, David is promised that one of his offspring will reign over Israel from his throne in Jerusalem. That offspring will be the singular seed (Gal 3:16) through whom God will bless Israel and the nations.

## NATURE

As an extension of the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant is likewise eternal and unconditional in nature. This is clear from the immediate context as well, where God promises to David that his house, throne, and kingdom will be established “forever” (7:11, 13, 15). Also of significance is that fact that no conditions or stipulations are placed on David; this is a divine promise that will be fulfilled by God alone. Several reiterations in Scripture affirm the eternal and unconditional nature of the covenant:

- Psalm 89:3-4, 34-37
- Isaiah 9:7

## **THE NEW COVENANT**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. <sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Reiterations:

- Jeremiah 32:40
- Ezekiel 16:60-62; 34:25-31; 37:26-28
- Romans 11:25-27
- Hebrews 8:6-13

## **PARTIES**

As the above makes clear, the New covenant is a pact made between God and “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Thus, the New covenant is a covenant between God and Israel. At the same time, even in the Old Testament it becomes clear the New covenant does not exclude gentiles. As the prophet Isaiah wrote:

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my **covenant**—<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” <sup>8</sup> The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

– Isaiah 56:7-8

See also Isaiah 19:22-25 and Isaiah 49:6. In essence, there is a spillover of blessing to the nations, which is in keeping with the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3). This becomes all the more clear in the New Testament, where the church is identified as enjoying many of the New Covenant blessings.

## PROMISES

Like the previous covenants, the New covenant is also an extension of the Abrahamic covenant with a particular emphasis on the promise of blessing. In the New covenant, God promises to do what the law was unable to accomplish: to make Israel fit to enjoy the full blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Thus, God promises to Israel:

- A new heart (Ezek 11:19-20)
- Permanent forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:34; 33:8)
- Spiritual life (Ezek 37:1-14)
- The permanent indwelling Holy Spirit (Ezek 37:26)
- The law in the heart (Jer 31:33)
- Reconstitution and physical blessing for Israel (Ezek 37:15-23)

These spiritual blessings make fit the nation of Israel to enjoy the material blessings promised in the Abrahamic covenant. Notice the logical connection in Ezekiel 37:27-28, where the prophet writes, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” Dwelling in the land of promise follows the future obedience of regenerated Israel.

## NATURE

The New covenant is an extension of the Abrahamic covenant and thus shares its eternal and unconditional nature. The Old Testament prophets often speak of the New covenant in ways that indicate its timeless nature; it is viewed as the culminating covenant that produces genuine and lasting change in the hearts of Israel. Jeremiah, for example, calls it an “everlasting covenant” (Jer 32:40).