

COVENANTS

Covenants & Consequences

Lecture 1

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What is a Covenant?

A covenant, in Biblical terms, can be loosely defined as an agreement between two parties. Founded in the Ancient Near Eastern culture, the covenant served as a primary document of relationship between the powerful and less powerful, obligating one or both parties to fulfill commitments under a penalty of divine punishment. God uses covenants in both the Old and New Testaments, as the primary expression of His relationship with His people.

The Bible mentions three types of covenants (or agreements), and focuses on the two that express God's relationship with man. The covenant least mentioned is the Kinship Covenant. This is a covenant between equals that binds them in friendship and respect. Participants call each other "brothers." It is an agreement between men (Gen. 21:27; 26:31; 31:44-54; 1 Kings 5:12; 15:19, 20:32-34; Amos 1:9).

The Bible primarily refers to two types of covenants: The Royal Grant, and the Suzerain-vassal Treaty. Biblical covenants usually included a verbal pronouncement of the covenant ("I now establish my covenant with you..." – Gen. 9:9), blessings and cursings ("Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood." – Gen. 9:11), and a public seal or sign that reminded both parties of covenant commitments ("Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." – Gen. 9:16).

- A formal agreement between two parties
- Witnessed by both humans and Deities
- Proclaimed by public reading and "deposit" of treaty in public place
 - Esp., shrines of witnessing Deities
- Sealed by an oath and ritual sacrifice
 - "If I am not faithful to this covenant, may what is done to these animals be done to me."

What is a Covenant?

Hebrew word for covenant

The word in Hebrew used for covenant is **berith**, which occurs 286 times in the Old Testament. The root of this word is difficult to determine for certain, but the word implies mutual obligation in a treaty, agreement, or promise, always in the context of a relationship. A covenant is a legally binding obligation, and was normally given with an oath, and witnessed by God. It remains legally binding for the period of time specified in the agreement. A covenant can therefore be defined as follows: *“A legal framework for expressing, establishing and defining a relationship”*.

The law of Moses is embedded within the covenant between God and Israel, and therefore should be seen primarily as a relational bond, rather than as a legal contract. A legal contract is a merely an impersonal business transaction, whereas a covenant is a means by which two people, groups or nations agree to relate to one another on a long-term basis.

Greek word for covenant

The Greek word is **diatheke**, used 270 times in the Septuagint to translate berith, where it retains the same meaning. “Diatheke” is used over thirty times in the New Testament, with the same meaning as the Hebrew “berith”. In some places in the NT, it has an additional meaning of a “testament” or “will”.

Three Kinds of Covenants

- Suzerain-vassal Treaty
 - Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status
- Kinship (Parity) Treaty
 - Agreement between two parties of equal status
- Grant
 - Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status

Suzerain-vassal Treaty

The Suzerain-vassal Treaty was a covenant made between a great king and one his subject kings. The Great king demanded absolute loyalty (the vassal must “love” his suzerain), and offered complete protection. Michael Horton points out that these treaties were not just legal documents but a public expression of the deepest affections. “The great king was the father adopting the captives he had liberated from oppression. Consequently, he was not simply to be obeyed externally, but loved; not only feared, but revered; not only known as the legal lord of the realm, but acknowledged openly as the rightful sovereign.”¹

This form of covenant included the following formal elements:

1. Preamble –This identified the Great King. “I am the LORD your God” – Deut. 5:6; Ex. 20:1-2.
2. Historical Prologue – What the Great King had done for the vassals. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” – Deut. 5:6; Josh 23: 9-10; Judg 2:1.
3. Stipulations - The Great King’s rules and requirements. We refer to one example as the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3-17; Deut. 5:7-21).
4. Blessings and Sanctions – This spells out the benefits for those who keep the treaty, and punishments for those who do not keep the treaty. Ancient Near Eastern kings usually evicted and exiled treaty breakers. (Deut. 5:32-33; 6:24-25; 7:9-11; Josh 23:12-13).
5. Deposit of Treaty/Public reading/Ceremony and sealing – Both parties kept a copy of the treaty in their sacred temples (so the gods could keep a constant witness), and vassals were required to publicly and regularly read the treaty so that succeeding generations understood their obligations. The treaty would be ratified in public ceremony that might include public signs or seals as reminders. (Ex. 24:1-8; Deut. 6:6-9, 20-25; Josh 24:16-27).

¹ Horton, Michael. God of Promise. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006, p. 25.

Kinship Treaty

In a Kinship Covenant the obligations of the covenant are more or less equally distributed between the two parties. In such a covenant the parties are usually, but not always, themselves of equal status. This is often called a “parity” covenant. One of the best examples of a kinship covenant was the one made between King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre (1 Kg. 5). Another example is the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-34).

- Two parties of equal power and social status
 - Two monarchs forming an alliance for mutual aid
 - Two merchants forming a trade agreement
 - Marriage contract (ketubah) between the father of the bride and the groom (NOTE: the bride herself is not of equal status with the groom)

Royal Grant

The Royal Grant was a grant of land or benefit made by a king to a faithful servant. It was unconditional and its benefits could be passed down to the servant's heirs as long as they continued to exemplify their father's faithful service.

The basic supposition of the Grant was that the rights of the new land-owner and his heirs are guaranteed by the king in perpetuity. Curses were directed towards any who might seek to seize the land or deny the reality of the grant - for example *"... anyone who shall rise up and shall put forward a claim concerning that land ... or shall say 'this land was not a gift' ... or shall appropriate it for himself ... may all the gods who are upon this stone, (and) whose names are mentioned, curse him with a curse that cannot be loosened."*

This is in clear contrast with Covenant treaties (of any age), in which the curses were directed at the vassal in the event that he should break the agreement. The blessings of the agreement were evidently directed in very tangible form to the recipient. Examples of The Royal Grant: Noah (Gen. 9:8-17); Abraham (Gen. 15:9-21); Phinehas (Num.25:10-13); David (2 Sam. 7:5-16); New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).

- Free gift of land or benefit to faithful subject of a great monarch or servant of a wealthy landowner
- Greater party binds self to the treaty
- Lesser party benefits from the gift, but may not be bound to any specific stipulations, either before or after reception of the grant