

COVENANT CHRISTIANITY

COVENANT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: A JOURNEY FROM SINAI

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INTRODUCTION: In September I was the primary speaker at the annual SoulJourners conference in Colorado Springs. My assigned topic was "Covenant Connections," which I addressed from the perspectives of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the contemporary challenge. It was a very rewarding study for me as I prepared, and so I decided to revise much of my information into a series of sermons, which I believe will be relevant for 21st century Christianity in general and for First Baptist church in particular.

This morning I will begin with an emphasis on the covenant established by God with the Hebrew people at Mt. Sinai, following the exodus. In the weeks ahead I will look at Jeremiah's new covenant in light of the historical developments in the history of the Hebrews. And I will examine the New Testament teachings as found in the life and ministry of Jesus, and the teachings and contributions of the Apostle Paul. Depending on the circumstances, I may reverse the sermons on Jesus and Paul, but I'll let you know ahead of time if I decide to do this.

Introductory comments on covenant: The theme for this sermon series can be based upon the words of Jeremiah *"Behold, the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Within these words is one of the most important concepts in the Scriptures, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. That is the concept of the covenant, an agreement or compact between God and his people, either individual or corporate, in which God makes certain promises and requires certain behavior from a person or group in return.

There are two types of agreements in the OT. **Suzerainty covenants** are between a superior or greater power and a lesser power, and usually were used in religious situations involving God and man. Most often, this would apply to God and Israel, or to God and one of the representative Hebrew figures. In a suzerainty covenant, **God as the superior party would set forth the conditions of the covenant, and the lesser partner would accept or reject it.** Also, such a covenant was usually **conditional**, based upon the intent to keep or not keep the agreement.

Parity covenants were between two equals and were used in ordinary situations. Examples of a parity covenant would be, for example, an agreement between a patriarch, such as Abraham, and a king or ruler, such as the Pharaoh of Egypt. The two parties would negotiate an agreement and then affirm the covenant with a pledge, or sometimes with a blood ceremony.

I. Characteristics of the Covenants between God and the Hebrews: Although varying from covenant to covenant, there are several characteristics of covenants between men in the Hebrew Bible. **An understanding of these characteristics helps us to understand the covenants between God and the Hebrews.**

A. The terms of the covenant are usually stated. In the covenant between Isaac and Abimelech of Gerar (Gen. 26:29) the two parties agree not to harm each other. In Gen. 31 Jacob and his father-in-law agree to do each other no harm in future dealings.

B. Each party usually took an oath to agree to the terms. In the case of Jacob and Laban, they agreed to the terms and called upon God to keep an eye upon the other person so that he would not sneak around and do him harm. In the case of Jacob and his reputation as a trickster, this may have been a good idea for Laban. (See Deut. 27:15-26)

C. A curse or the consequences of breaking the covenant were often included. Sometimes this may have been a part of the oath, sometimes it was implied, or sometimes it was spelled out. In Deuteronomy 27:15, it was stated that a curse would be upon anyone who made an idol. This verse is followed by a number of other restrictions, such as dishonoring one's parents, or moving a neighbor's boundary markers, and so on. Breaking a covenant or an oath would bring its consequences. *{Comment: one aspect to this situation is that our actions often bring with them consequences. It is a natural order of things. And while the interpretation here is that God punishes us when we break our covenant, we should realize that our own choices lead to whatever happens, good or bad}*

D. Usually, there was some formal ratification by some symbolic act. Sprinkling blood upon an altar, some special meal, or in the case of Abraham's covenant with God the splitting apart of animals, and Abraham and a symbol of God, in this case a smoking firepot or a flaming torch, passing between the two halves representing life, which signified the ratification of the covenant by the two parties.

II. COVENANTS BETWEEN GOD AND THE HEBREWS: From the earliest times, covenants were made between God and man.

A. One of the first of these was the covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18; Gen. 9:8-17). In the story prior to the flood, God initiates a covenant with Noah, in which He promises to save Noah and his family from the deluge. The rainbow is given as a sign of the covenant. God promises not to destroy the earth again by flood. Out of this covenant, God makes a new beginning. He starts over with Noah, but the results are not much better than with the previous generations.

B. One of the most important covenants is with Abraham: In Gen. 17:3-12, God once more begins anew with Abraham. God initiates the covenant, and promises Abraham that he will multiply and be the father of many nations, that he will be fruitful, that kings shall come from him, and that the land of Canaan will be given as a homeland for Abraham and his descendants.

Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant. The **covenant and the land** would be closely intertwined in the history of the Hebrew people. A pattern was established that is seen throughout the Hebrew Bible. Obedience to the covenant would result in a secure life in the Promised Land. Disobedience threatened loss of the land. Even today, claims for the possession of this land are made by religious Jews based upon the ancient promises of the covenant.

C. Covenant between God and Israel: In terms of the nation **Israel**, the covenant established at Mt. Sinai following the exodus from Egypt in the 13th century, B.C., and described in Exodus 19: 3-6, is crucial to both understanding and interpreting the history of the Hebrews from the this time throughout the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. The passage reads:

³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ 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, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." ⁷ So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him. ⁸ The

people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD. (NIV)

The covenant was founded upon the greatness and power of God. It was also conditional. The little word "if" is very important.

Following the acceptance of the covenant with God by the Hebrews, the requirements of the covenant were spelled out in greater detail in the 10 Commandments or the 10 Words (Exodus 20), and elaborated upon in what the scholars call the "Covenant Code" found in Exodus 21-23.

III. DEUTERONOMIC THEOLOGY AND DEUTERONOMIC HISTORY

The 10 Commandments are repeated and elaborated upon in Deuteronomy 5. In fact, the Book of Deuteronomy (the Second Law) is the link between the exodus and wilderness experiences and the conquest, settlement, and establishment of the people in the Land of Canaan. What is really interesting here is that in the Christian Canon, these books that relate the conquest and settlement of the Land (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings) are called "history." But in the Hebrew Bible, they are called "prophets!" In the Hebrew canon these writings are "the Former Prophets," which separates them from "the Latter Prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, or what we call the Minor Prophets). *{Note also that in the Hebrew Canon the Former Prophets are comprised of four books, not six as in the Christian Canon – Samuel and Kings are each one book, whereas in the Christian canon they are four – 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. Why? A very practical reason. The scrolls were too long and had to be divided.}*

Why were these historical books called "prophets?" The answer is very important in understanding the place of the covenant in the Hebrew tradition. Everything that happens in the Former Prophets is interpreted by the covenant, especially the theological basis for the people as found in Deuteronomy. Many scholars refer to the author of the Former Prophets as the Deuteronomic Historian, who writes his "history" interpreted through the theology of the Book of Deuteronomy. Look at Deuteronomy 11:22-28.

²² If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him-²³ then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you.²⁴ Every place where you set your foot will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea.²⁵ No man will be able to stand against you. The LORD your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go. (NIV)

²⁶ See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse-²⁷ the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today;²⁸ the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. (NIV)

At this point we need to anticipate the results of this theological command and interpretation. What will be the most important issue in relation to the taking and the holding of the land of Canaan? It will be turning to the gods of their neighbors which will result in the greatest issue in terms of keeping the covenant. In this sense the people will violate the commitment to be "a holy nation." From the time of the covenant there will be this tension between trying to be a "kingdom of priests" on the one hand and "a holy nation" on the other. Following the restoration of the nation after the Babylonian Exile, for example, there will result on the one hand a narrow exclusivism, and on the other a call to be a mission people, a

light to the nations. What is interesting is that the first view interprets the loss of the nation as punishment for breaking the covenant. The second view sees the suffering of the people as an example of the servant role of God's people and a fulfillment of the "kingdom of Priests" command.

These and other passages describe the criteria for understanding the history of the people in the taking, the possession, and the holding or the losing of Canaan. Also, I think that it is *so important* to realize that the Former Prophets were written many, many years *after* the events described therein had taken place. Materials surely would have been gathered over the centuries. And final editing would have taken place after the fall of the two Hebrew kingdoms, Israel and Judah, hence after 587/6 B.C. So the message of the Former Prophets was for contemporary and later generations, not simply a record of the past. If you keep the covenant, God will bless you. If you disobey, God will punish you. Look at your history. It is a prophetic warning that calls for obedience to the covenant or facing the consequences of disobedience.

Let me elaborate. You need to understand the history of Israel. The exodus takes place, according to most scholars, around 1290 B.C. The people wander in the wilderness for about 40 years, they then attack the land and establish themselves there around 1200 B. C. The period of the Judges or deliverers runs from around 1200 B.C to about 1020 B.C., a time in which there is a very loose political-religious structure, a tribal league or a religious confederacy.

One of the really important concepts for understanding the covenant is the commitment to a theocratic ideal. The foundation for the political-religious alliance in Israel was the ideal of a *theocracy*, a people under the rule of God. The foundation for this commitment goes back to the time of the Judges, and in particular to the time of Gideon. In Judges 8:22-23, after Gideon had defeated the Midianites and "delivered" his fellow members of the tribe of Manasseh, the tribal leaders offered to make him king. He responded, "I will not rule over you, my son will not rule over you, God will rule over you." In other words, Gideon planted the seed of a theocracy, which dominated Hebrew thought in the centuries to come.

However, especially because of the threat of the Philistines, a real need arose to move beyond the tribal league of the period of the Judges. Israel determined to be "like the other nations" and established a monarchy. If you compare material in 1 Samuel 8:4-9 (negative) and 1 Samuel 9:19-22 (positive), you can see under the surface a real debate over whether or not the monarchy was a good idea. Perhaps the negative position, called the Samuel Source, was a result of looking back many years later and seeing the struggles and failures of the monarchy, while the positive material, called the Saul Source, reflected an earlier period when there was hope and optimism for the new monarchy

One other characteristic of the Hebrew monarchy worth noting is the fact that the kings were under the watchful eye of the prophets. In a theocracy the political leaders ranked below the religious leaders, who represented God – at least in theory. In other nations the priestly class was simply a part of the national structure, kind of like a Department of Religion. A good example of the Hebrew theocratic approach was when Nathan, the prophet, condemned David because of his sin with Bathsheba. He told the story of the rich man who took a poor man's only sheep and served him to his guests. After David condemned the rich man, Nathan confronted him, saying "You are that man!" To David's credit he repented and moved forward.

The United Monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon lasted from around 1020 until around 922 B.C. After Solomon, the nation divided into North and South, Israel and Judah, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. It is a chaotic time of setbacks and failures, along with some successes. Powerful nations were arising who sought to control the strategic mid-section of the Fertile Crescent,

which would serve as a buffer between the greater nations, such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, et. al. In 722 B.C. Israel is conquered by the nation of Assyria, but the South survives. After being caught in the struggle between Egypt and Babylonia, Judah finally falls to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians around 587-586 B.C. Jerusalem is captured, the walls to the city torn down, the temple of Solomon razed to the ground, and the cream of the crop taken off to Babylon to join other deportees in the period known as the Babylonian Captivity or the Babylonia Exile. Piecing together material from 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, one can determine that there were actually at least four groups of exiles taken into captivity over several years during the last days of the the Southern Kingdom.

Keep in mind that during the latter years of this history during the time of King Josiah of Judah a law scroll is discovered in a cleansing or renovation of the temple, about the year 621 B.C. Most scholars believe that this law scroll was the Book of Deuteronomy and its emphasis upon the covenant. A short-lived reformation took place, but the impact of the law scroll continued.

After the fall of Judah as the history of the people from the time of Joshua to the end of the Divided Monarchy in 587-586 B.C. was being written, it was interpreted from the theology of Deuteronomy. Every success was attributed to the keeping of the covenant; every failure was interpreted as an example of disobedience to the covenant.

E.g., during the time of the Joshua every battle was interpreted in light of the covenant. When the people took the ancient, walled city of Jericho, without shall we say firing a shot, it was because they had been obedient to God. When they were roundly defeated at the little village of Ai, it was because the covenant had been violated at Jericho by Achan. When they returned again and succeeded at Ai, it was because they had eliminated the sin of Aachen and his whole family. The fact that the Hebrew army had a much better battle plan was insignificant. *{Keep in mind the Hebrew concept of corporate personality. The sin of one person was the sin of his family, and even of the entire nation. It had to be dealt with. Aachen is a prime example of this}*

During the time of the Judges, the people of a particular tribe would break the covenant by worshiping the gods of their neighbors. Outside oppressors would threaten or actually take away possession of the land. The people then would cry out to God and renew the covenant, and He would raise up a judge to deliver the people from the oppressors. Peace would be restored until another round of covenant breaking would take place.

A king was judged good or bad not on the basis of his politician, administrative, organizational, or military skills, but solely upon whether or not he had led the people in keeping or breaking the covenant. For example, King Baasha, who ruled over Israel in the north for 24 years.(1 Kings 15:27-34), gets 8 verses in the Hebrew Bible. Very little is told of his administration, but in vs. 34 we are told that Baasha "did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he made Israel to sin."

Zimri (1 Kings 16:9-20) assassinated Elah, the son of Baasha. A rebellion took place under the leadership of Omri, and Zimri committed suicide after ruling for only seven days. He obviously was a "week" king! But note the religious interpretation of his very, very limited reign. His death was "because of his sins which he sinned doing evil in the sight of the Lord, walking in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin which he did, making Israel to sin" So Zimri is condemned for leading Israel astray, quite an accomplishment for a king who lasted for only one week, and one who spent most of this time under siege by Omri and the Israelite army!

The formula was all too simple – keep the covenant and be blessed in the land; violate the covenant and be threatened with the loss of the land. In the end the fall of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, to Assyria, and the fall of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, to Babylonia were not interpreted as results of outside, powerful nations and leaders seeking political and military dominance and therefore control of the mid-section of the Fertile Crescent, but rather upon the breaking of the covenant. Whatever happened had a religious reason, and for the Deuteronomic history that was all that mattered.

The bottom line is this. The purpose of the Former Prophets was not primarily to record and relate history, it was to interpret it. "Why did we lose the land that God had given to us? We kept breaking the covenant. We kept being disobedient, despite numerous warnings. God kept his promises, we did not, and now we are paying the consequences."

And the purpose of the Former Prophets was to encourage the generation to which the author spoke to be faithful to the covenant, unlike their fathers and their father's fathers, unlike so many of the kings in the United and Divided Kingdoms, and unlike the false priests and the false prophets who had led the people astray and into disobedience.

Understanding this helps us to understand the narrow exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were trying to get rid of the foreign influences in order to keep the Israelites as a "holy nation," or a "holy people". Others, such as Isaiah of Babylon saw it differently, and reminded the people that they were to be a "kingdom of priests," a light to the nations with a mission and purpose to spread God's care and concern, not hide it.

CONCLUSION:

A. In final analysis the original intent of the covenant between God and Israel had great merit. The call of the people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation represents two great qualities of religion: service and ethics; missions and morality; doing and being.

B. The challenge for us to today from our understanding of the covenant is to figure out how to minister and serve, while at the same time commit to being a moral and ethical people. It is not easy to be in the world but not of the world. And yet, this is our challenge.

C. We can learn from the study of the Hebrew covenant with God not to get side-tracked on issues, such as the law, to the neglect of the main purpose of the covenant – to be a ministering, serving, caring people, and to be a people who reflect the highest ethical standards without religious arrogance. If we can do this, we will fulfill our purpose, and we will reflect the goals of the covenant of the Hebrew people made with God at Mt. Sinai.

Jeremiah's "new covenant" will be the focus of our attention next Sunday.