

# Covenants

## Described

A God-given covenant is an *undertaking* by which He *unconditionally* and/or *conditionally promises* or *guarantees* or *binds* Himself to fulfil His *plans* for humans and sometimes creation.

A covenant of God is a *bond* which He initiates between Himself and humans and sometimes His natural creation.

## The Old Testament word for covenant

The one Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for covenant is “berit”. It is used over 280 times in the Old Testament. Some of these references are about covenants between two or more humans (see Joshua 9:6, 1 Samuel 11:1-2, 2 Samuel 3:12-13 and 5:3), but most of these relate to covenants between God, people and sometimes His creation.

When commenting on the Hebrew word “berit”, Gleason Archer says: “*The original meaning of this word was probably “fetter” or “obligation”, coming from a root baru, ‘to bind’. This root does not occur as a verb in Hebrew, but it does occur in Akkadian as baru, ‘to bind’, and appears as a noun in the Akkadian biritu, which means ‘bond’ or ‘fetter’. Thus a berit would originally signify a relationship between two parties wherein each bound himself to perform a certain service or duty for the other.*”<sup>1</sup>

## A covenant is a bond between God and others

“Berit” refers to a bond or a chain or fetter which ties God (the superior) to humans (the inferiors) and them to Him. God binds Himself by *guaranteeing* to do certain things for humans and sometimes His creation. This bond or covenant contains a statement of the responsibilities of – God – the Person doing the binding and sometimes of those being bound.

In a covenant, God binds humans to Himself:

- by *commanding* them to accept those parts of His covenant which is *conditional* on human response.
- by *fulfilling* the *unconditional* parts of His covenant in relation to humans regardless of their response.

Ezekiel 20:37 refers to the “*bond of the covenant*”: “*...I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.*” In the original Hebrew, the word “*bond*” here is “macoreth”. The word “macoreth” is derived from the Hebrew word “asar” which means “tie, bind, harness, bind with cords (or) fetters”.<sup>2</sup> The word “asar” is used in Judges 15:13, 16:11 and Ezekiel 3:25 in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell (Editor), “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology”, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, page 276.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 63.

sense of tying up someone with ropes and in Psalm 149:8 for binding people with chains and iron fetters. “Asar” is also used in 1 Samuel 6:7 and 6:10 in relation to tying cows to a cart and in Jeremiah 46:4 for the harnessing of horses.

Weinfeld says, “The original meaning of the Hebrew ‘berith’ is *not* ‘agreement or settlement between two parties’, as is commonly argued. ‘Berith’ implies first and foremost the notion of ‘imposition’, ‘liability’ or ‘obligation’...”<sup>3</sup> God’s covenants are a bond not only in the sense of His guaranteed responsibilities to His people and/or natural creation. His covenants are a bond also in relation to:

- His total commitment to His people in terms of His faithfulness and love.
- His determination to have an intimate relationship with His people. This is the bonding of intimacy. This is what God has eternally planned for us in Christ.

Another aspect of the bond feature of God’s covenants is the human response He requires to the conditional parts of these covenants. Humans bind themselves to God by willingly submitting to the conditional terms of His covenants.

## **God’s covenants are commanded by Him**

Deuteronomy 4:13, Judges 2:20 and Psalm 111:9 refer to God binding humans to Himself by commanding them to accept His covenant(s). Judges 2:20 refers to God’s covenant being commanded by Him when it says: “...*My covenant which I commanded their fathers...*”

## **God’s covenants contain His promises**

1 Kings 8:23-25, 8:56, Galatians 3:15-18, Ephesians 2:12, Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15 show that God’s covenants contain His promises to those people under His covenants. Ephesians 2:12 refers to the “*covenants of promise*”. When comparing the New Covenant to the Mosaic Covenant, Hebrews 8:6 states: “*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.*”

## **Conditional and unconditional promises of God in His covenants**

God-given covenants contain conditional and/or unconditional promises. Conditional promises are those in which God pledges to do certain things only if humans beforehand do certain things required by Him. For example, in the New Covenant God promises that humans can enjoy its awesome benefits only on the condition they have a sincere living faith in Jesus Christ.

Unconditional promises are those in which God guarantees He will do certain things for the specific humans without any response from them being required by Him. For example, God

---

<sup>3</sup> G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Editors), “Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament”, Volume 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, page 255.

promised to put one of David's descendants – Jesus Christ – eternally on David's throne, regardless of the responses of David's other ancestors (see Psalm 89:19-37).<sup>4</sup>

## **Covenants are like ancient treaties between kings and their subjects**

Van Groningen argues the following about God's covenants with humans:

*“God initiated, determined the elements, and confirmed his covenant with humanity. It is unilateral. Persons are recipients, not contributors; they are not expected to offer elements to the bond; they are called to accept it as offered, to keep it as demanded, and to receive the results that God, by oath, assures will not be withheld. Scholars have learned by studying tablets found by archaeologists that legal treaties between kings (suzerains) and subjects (vassals) existed during the time of the biblical patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, and the first kings of Israel. These treaties were written on tablets for the purpose of establishing a continuing relationship as determined and authorized by the suzerain. Once written, the covenants were not to be altered or annulled although parts could be explicated or elaborated...The legal covenants included provisions for continuity, with emphasis on the suzerain's claim to vassals' children, and were confirmed by an oath or a special ratification ceremony, like the cutting in half of an ox or cow or the sharing of a meal as the conclusion of the act of covenanting...Did biblical writers borrow from pagan sources when they wrote about Yahweh God's covenantal activities on behalf of and his relationships with his people? There is no reference of any kind in the Bible that this was done. There are marked similarities between biblical and the nonbiblical covenants. The most satisfactory and acceptable position is that Yahweh God is the source and originator of the entire concept and phenomenon. He included the covenant relationship in his creation activity and handiwork. Covenant is germane to human life; it is God-implemented and unfolded.”*<sup>5</sup> The word “explicate” above means “develop” and “germane” means “relevant”.

## **The New Testament word for covenant**

The word used in the original Greek New Testament for covenant is “diatheke”. This word is also used over 270 times in the Septuagint as an equivalent for the Hebrew word “berit”. “Diatheke” occurs only 33 times in the New Testament. Richards says: *“From early times the Greeks used ‘diatheke’ in the sense of a will. In contrast to a syntheke, which spelled out terms of a partnership, a diatheke permitted an individual to dispose of possessions any way that person chose. The decision, once expressed in a will, could not be annulled by another party. But the will became effective only after the person making it died.”*<sup>6</sup>

## **Covenants are not contracts**

When discussing the usages in the New Testament of the word “covenant”, Archer says that the New Testament writers do not use the Greek word “syntheke” which is their normal word for “contract” because “syntheke” implied equality on the part of the two parties making the contract. He then goes on to say the following about the word “diatheke”: *“In secular Greek*

---

<sup>4</sup> An example of an unconditional promise not linked to one of God's covenants is found in Genesis 41:25-36. Note Genesis 41:32 emphasises the unconditional nature of the promise.

<sup>5</sup> Walter A. Elwell (Editor), “Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology”, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1996, pages 124-125.

<sup>6</sup> Richards, page 195.

this word usually meant 'will' or 'testament', but even classical authors like Aristophanes (*Birds* 439) occasionally used it of a covenant wherein one of the two parties had an overwhelming superiority over the other and could dictate his own terms. Hence the biblical *diatheke* signified (in a way much more specific than did *berit*) an arrangement made by one party with plenary power, which the other party may accept or reject but cannot alter."<sup>7</sup> The word "plenary" here means "entire" or "absolute".

A major error of many modern Christians is they imagine God's covenants are like *contracts between two equal parties*. On the basis of this error, they often try to *demand* God to fulfill what He has promised in His covenants. They treat Him like He is their equal partner who has made a legal contract with them. They talk to God just like they would to their business partners. Some even demand Him similarly to how they do when they are casting out a demon.

The correct response to God's covenants is *trusting faith, thankfulness and obedience* to its terms and conditions. As the inferior party in our covenantal relationship to Him, we must *trust* and *thank* Him for doing whatever He promises in His covenants. But this does not mean we can arrogantly treat Him as though He is our equal. In faith, we should be *certain* God will do what He has promised. But we must not try to boss Him around.

## Covenants are not bargained agreements

God's covenants are *not agreements* which are *a result of bargaining* between Him and people. In each of God's covenants, He has *taken the initiative*, set the terms and conditions and then declared them to the relevant people.

God is so infinitely superior to humans, it would be impossible for His covenants with them to be based on negotiation. This is especially since all humans are born in such a sinful fallen condition. A covenant negotiated by humans would obviously contain some form of sin, so He could never allow such a thing.

Whenever sinning humans chose to return to God, they renewed the terms of the covenant relevant to them but did not change its features (see Deuteronomy Chapters 29 and 30, 2 Kings 23:1-25 and 2 Chronicles 29:1-11).

Vine said: "A '*diatheke*' is a will that distributes one's property after death according to the owner's wishes. It is completely unilateral".<sup>8</sup> The word "unilateral" above means "made by one person" or "one-sided". God's covenants are *not agreements or contracts between equals*. Instead His covenants are authored, initiated and *commanded by Him*.

Brown says of the word "diatheke": "*It denotes, therefore, an irrevocable decision, which cannot be cancelled by anyone. A prerequisite of its effectiveness before the law is the death of the disposer. Hence diatheke must be clearly distinguished from syntheke, an agreement. In the latter, two partners engaged in common activity accept reciprocal obligations. Diatheke is found only once with this meaning (Aristoph. Birds, I, 440). Elsewhere it always means a one-sided action.*"<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew and Greek words for "covenant" are never used in the Bible for agreements between equals, but *always* refer to undertakings between *superiors* and *inferiors*. The superiors are kings or lords or powerful nations and the inferiors are subjects, vassal kings, vassal nations and so on. The word "vassal" refers to individuals or nations who vow total loyalty, faithfulness, service and respect to the superior who has given them a covenant.

---

<sup>7</sup> Elwell, "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology", page 278.

<sup>8</sup> Vine, page 51.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Brown, Volume , page 365.

Some may argue Genesis 21:32, 26:26-31, 31:43-55, 1 Samuel 18:3, 20:8, 20:16-18, Judges 2:2 and 1 Kings 15:18-19 are Biblical examples of covenants between equals. But note Genesis 21:32 refers to a covenant between the superior King Abimelech and his vassal Abraham. Genesis 26:26-31 relates to King Abimelech and his vassal Isaac. Genesis 31:43-55 refers to a covenant between Laban and his son-in-law Jacob. Note in Genesis 31:41, Jacob recognised he was Laban's servant – an inferior.

1 Samuel 18:3, 20:8, 20:16-18 and 23:18 relate to Prince Jonathon making a covenant with his servant David. In 1 Samuel 20:8, David refers to himself as Jonathon's servant. 1 Samuel 20:8, 20:16 and 22:8 refer to Jonathon making the covenant with David and not vice-verser. Judges 2:2 relates to God commanding the Israelites not to make covenants with the pagan Canaanite nations. Note God regarded the Israelites as superiors and the pagan nations as inferiors in this sense. God commanded the Israelites to destroy these wicked nations and not make covenants with them.

1 Kings 15:18 refers to King Asa of Judah becoming a vassal of King Ben-Hadad of Syria. These verses mention Asa sending all of his treasures to Ben-Hadad as a sign of him being willing to become Ben-Hadad's vassal. Other lord-vassal or master-servant human covenants are recorded in 1 Samuel 11:11-2, 1 Kings 11:4-12, 1 Chronicles 11:1-3, 2 Chronicles 23:1-11 and Ezekiel 17:2-18.<sup>10</sup>

## Cutting the covenant

The technical expression “cutting the covenant” is often used in the Old Testament for making a covenant and relates to the fact blood sacrifices were usually associated with such covenants. In the original Hebrew Old Testament, the word for “cut” in relation to cutting a covenant is the verb “karat”. Vine says the following about “karat”: *“This verb, therefore, constitutes a rather technical term for making a covenant. In Genesis it often alludes to an act by which animals were cut in two and the party taking the oath passed between the pieces...Later, ‘cutting’ a covenant did not necessarily include this act but seems to be an allusion to the Abrahamic covenantal*

---

<sup>10</sup> Numerous English translations of the Bible use the word “**agreement**” in Isaiah 28:15 and 18 in relation to mentions of the word “**covenant**”. Isaiah 28:18 says: **“Your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand...”** In Hebrew, the word “**agreement**” above is “hazut”. “Hazut” means “vision” (Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 274) and does not mean “**agreement**”. Note in Hebrew, the word “**stand**” in Isaiah 28:18 is “qum” which relates in some contexts to “confirming or establishing” a covenant (Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 793). The usage of “qum” in this verse confirms that Isaiah is referring to a covenant when he uses the Hebrew word “hazut”. To translate “hazut” in Isaiah 28:18 as “**agreement**” can only be done if a translator makes the false assumption that covenants are agreements. In Hebrew, the word “**agreement**” in Isaiah 28:15 is “hozeh”. “Hozeh” means “seer” and not “agreement” (Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 274). “Hozeh” is used in 2 Samuel 24:11, 1 Chronicles 21:9, 25:5, 29:25, 29:29, 29:30, 2 Chronicles 9:29, 12:5, 19:2, 35:15 and Amos 7:12 in relation to the seers or prophets Gad, Heman, Asaph, Iddo, Jehu, Jeduthun and Amos. Read also 2 Chronicles 33:18 which mentions the seers who wrote the Book of Kings. Note in Isaiah 29:10, Isaiah uses “hozeh” to mean “seers”. Isaiah 29:10 refers to Jerusalem just as Isaiah 28:15 and 18 both do. In Isaiah 28:15, Isaiah uses “hozeh” because he is referring to the false seer(s) or prophet(s) who had given the rulers of Jerusalem a false revelation in relation to a human covenant. In Isaiah 28:18, Isaiah uses the Hebrew word “hazut” to mean the actual false vision the false seer(s) had given the leaders of Jerusalem. The English translators of Isaiah 28:15 and 18 would have been more accurate if their renderings of “hozeh” and “hazut” had expressed these facts and had not involved the falsely assumed, simplistic meaning of “agreement”.

process (cf. Jer. 34:18). In such a covenant the one passing through the pieces pledged his faithfulness to the covenant.”<sup>11</sup>

Note the word “*made*” in Genesis 15:18, Exodus 24:8, 34:27, Deuteronomy 29:1, 29:25, 31:16, 1 Kings 8:9, 2 Kings 17:35, 1 Chronicles 16:16, 2 Chronicles 5:10, 6:11, 21:7, Psalm 89:3 and Jeremiah 11:10 is “*karat*” in Hebrew. These verses relate to God making or cutting a covenant. In the Old Testament, the expression “*to cut a covenant*” is used of a *superior*, usually a conqueror, setting or declaring terms and conditions for an *inferior* (see Deuteronomy 7:2, Joshua 9:11, 9:15, Judges 2:2 and 1 Samuel 11:1).

## **The death of a substitute – a foundation**

The Old Testament teaching on cutting a covenant shows the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic Covenants had *substitutionary death* as a *central foundation*. God’s making of these covenants could be described as “*cutting a covenant*” because it related so closely to cutting into pieces the animal whose death was a substitute for the humans involved in the covenant.

Substitutionary death is a foundation of God’s covenants because *God’s holiness* and *justice* are *behind* His covenants. His holiness and justice demand the death of guilty sinners. So the sinner or a substitute must die. Hebrews 9:15 shows that the foundation of the New Covenant was Jesus’ death: “*And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death...*”

## **God’s absolute faithfulness**

One of the key teachings of the Bible is God’s complete faithfulness to His covenants and to those people who are living under one or more of His covenants. God is faithful to His covenants and covenant people because of His *eternal love*, *grace* and *mercy* and not because they deserve it.

Two of the Hebrew Old Testament words which refer to God’s faithfulness to His covenants and covenant people are “*emunah*” and “*aman*”. “*Emunah*” is used in relation to God’s faithfulness in Psalm 36:5, 40:10, 89:1, 89:2, 89:8, 89:24, 89:33, 92:2, 98:3, 119:90, Isaiah 25:1, Lamentations 3:23 and Hosea 2:20. Lamentations 3:22-23 states: “*...Great is Your faithfulness.*” The word “*aman*” is used in relation to God being faithful in verses such as Deuteronomy 7:9, Isaiah 49:7 and Hosea 11:12.

The Hebrew word “*aman*” is linked to the Hebrew word “*berith*” meaning “*covenant*” in Deuteronomy 7:9: “*Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.*” The Hebrew word “*emunah*” is linked to His Covenant with David in Psalm 89:1-3 and 89:24-34.

The New Testament stresses God and Jesus Christ are absolutely faithful to Their covenants and covenant people. In the original Greek New Testament, the word “*pistos*” means “*faithful*”. “*Pistos*” is used when referring to God’s faithfulness in 1 Corinthians 1:9, 10:13, 2 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Timothy 2:13, Hebrews 10:23, 11:11, 1 Peter 4:19 and 1 John 1:9.

---

<sup>11</sup> Vine, page 146.

2 Timothy 2:13 says: ***“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”*** Hebrews 10:23 links God’s faithfulness to the promises of His New Covenant: ***“...for He who promised is faithful.”*** “Pistos” is used in relation to the absolute faithfulness of Jesus Christ to His covenant people in 2 Thessalonians 3:3 and Hebrews 2:17.

Human beings are so used to other humans being unfaithful to them in various ways, it is hard for them to imagine God and Jesus Christ being perfectly faithful to them.

## **Sworn Oaths by God**

A sworn oath involves someone *emphatically promising* to do certain specified things. The person swearing the oath guarantees he is not lying and has the power to fulfil what he promises.

God’s covenants with humans contain sworn oaths by Him. Hebrews 6:13-17 relates to this: ***“For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying ‘Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiply I will multiply you.’...For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath.”***

Genesis 24:7, 26:3, Exodus 6:8, Deuteronomy 7:8, 29:12-15, Psalm 105:8-11 and Jeremiah 11:1-5 also refer to God’s oaths in relation to His covenants.

## **Blessings and curses**

Some of God’s covenants – those containing conditional promises – contain mentions of the God-given blessings that come from fulfilling these conditions and the curses for not carrying these out. Blessings and curses associated with three of God’s covenants are listed in Genesis 2:15-17, Leviticus 26:1-39, Deuteronomy 28:1-68 and John 3:16-18.

## **Modern-day confusion about covenants**

Many Christians become confused because the New Testament Greek word for “covenant” means “testament” also. Therefore, when they read 2 Corinthians 3:14 in the King James Version which uses the expression ***“Old Testament”***, they wrongly equate all of the Books from Genesis to Malachi – which are called the Old Testament – as being an expression of the Old Covenant or Mosaic Covenant. The truth, however, is the Old Testament of 39 Books from Genesis to Malachi contains:

- possibly a covenant between God and Adam before the Fall.
- God’s Covenant with Noah.
- God’s Covenant with Abraham.
- the Mosaic Covenant or Old Covenant.
- God’s Covenant with David.
- plus a few other minor covenants God of God. Numbers 25:10-13 refers to the covenant God made with Phinehas, an Israelite priest. Hosea 2:18 records another covenant of God.

Something which confuses them further is the fact Hebrews 8:7, 9:1, 9:15 and 9:18 speak of the Old Covenant or Mosaic Covenant as being the first covenant. But the context of the usage of the word “*first*” in Hebrews Chapters 8 and 9, relates to a comparison between two covenants alone – the Mosaic and the New. When we compare just these two covenants, the Mosaic Covenant can be called first. But when taken in the context of the Bible as a whole, the Mosaic Covenant is not first. It comes after other covenants, such as the Noahic and Abrahamic.

## **God made many covenants and not just once**

In Romans 9:4, God said He gave “*covenants*” to the nation of Israel. Throughout history He has not just made one covenant with the Israelites and non-Israelite believers in Him.

In Ephesians 2:12, Paul refers to the “*covenants of promise*” and not just to a single covenant of promise.

### Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what a God-given is.
2. Explain why God’s covenants are bonds.
3. Discuss the command aspects of God’s covenants.
4. Discuss the promise aspects of God’s covenants.
5. Explain why God’s covenants are like ancient treaties between kings and their subjects.
6. Discuss why God’s covenants are not contracts between two equal parties.
7. Explain the reasons why covenants of God are not bargained agreements between God and humans.
8. What does cutting the covenant mean?
9. What does Hebrews 9:15 reveal about Jesus’ death and the New Covenant?
10. Explain what are the differences between God’s conditional and unconditional promises.
11. What are sworn oaths by God?
12. Why are many Christians confused about the relationship between the phrases “*Old Testament*” and “*Old Covenant*”?