

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS; THE NOAHIC COVENANT AND THE PRIESTLY COVENANT

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The prominence of the OT covenants throughout the Bible makes various facets of information about them—the etymology of the OT term, the OT and NT usages of relevant terms, covenant phraseologies, pledges, signs, witnesses, consequences, conditionality, and the number of covenants—matters of deepest interest to students of the Bible. The six covenants that provide a foundation for understanding God’s working in human history are the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Priestly, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New covenants. The Noahic Covenant came at the time of the great flood when God promised Noah, his family, and all mankind subsequent to them that He would never destroy the world with a flood again and gave a sign of the rainbow to remind Himself of His promise. God made the Priestly Covenant with Phinehas when Phinehas executed an Israelite man and a Moabite woman who were in process of consummating marriage with one another. He made it clear that this covenant like the other unconditional covenants was to be perpetual too.

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INTRODUCTION

Covenants play a prominent role in OT life—socially, politically, and religiously. The covenant idea itself, first mentioned in Genesis 6 during the days of Noah, is intricately woven into the fabric of the biblical account all the way through to Revelation 11 where the “ark of His covenant” reappears in the temple. The word itself occurs in 27 of 39 OT books and in 11 of 27 NT books.

The rise of the Documentary Hypothesis, fueled by the concept that religion in Israel developed along evolutionary lines, has in recent centuries suggested that the whole idea of covenants in Israel was a very late development. Following Julius Wellhausen’s anti-supernatural system, many modern scholars postulate that the covenant concept was foreign to Israelite society and religion until the late seventh

century B.C.¹

More recent contributions to covenant discussions, however, indicate an early origin of the covenant idea in Israel. In 1954, George Mendenhall became the first to note the parallels between some biblical covenants and the ancient Near-Eastern treaties, especially the Hittite treaties between overlords and vassals dating from the second millennium B.C.² The parallels, especially with the Mosaic Covenant, are so numerous and compelling that one must conclude that “some of the covenant material in the Old Testament literature may very well be extremely early.”³

Covenant Terminology

OT etymology. Though not totally foreign to present-day vocabulary, the English term *covenant* is seldom used. Outside of legal documents and marriage ceremonies, the word is absent from normal conversation. Webster defines it as “a binding and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals or parties to do or keep from doing a specified thing; a compact.” The term derives from the Latin *covenire*, meaning “to convene, meet together, to assemble for a common purpose.”

The meaning of the Hebrew term בְּרִית (bĕrît) is more obscure. Originating from the root ברה (brh),⁴ the word has several suggested meanings. Some associate the term with the Akkadian *baru*, “to bind, fetter,”⁵ pointing to Ezekiel 20:37 for support: “And I shall make you pass under the rod, and I shall bring you *into the bond of the covenant*” (בְּמַסְרֵת הַבְּרִית, bĕmāsōret habbĕrît). A possible parallel may exist with the Hittite dynastic suzerainty treaties, in which a vassal would enter into an oath of loyalty toward the king in return for past favors and future protection.⁶

On occasion, the root is used in the sense of “food, eating,” suggesting that bĕrît may speak of making a mutual alliance or obligation while sharing a meal (e.g.,

¹E.g., E. W. Nicholson, *God and his People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), and Lothar Peritt, “Covenant,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Brill, 1998) 709-11.

²Among others, Meredith G. Kline has authored numerous publications, the earliest of which is *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

³Roger T. Beckwith, “The Unity and Diversity of God’s Covenants,” *The Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987):95.

⁴Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 136.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1962) 1:132, and George E. Mendenhall, *Law & Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (reprint; Pittsburgh: Presbyterian Board of Colportage, 1955) 24-31.

2 Sam 12:17; 13:5, 6, 7, 10).⁷ But while the root may suggest such, the usage of *běit* declares otherwise, drawing into question what influence the root should hold in determining the meaning. As Quell notes, “Yet in none of the 286 instances of *בְּרִית* (*běrit*) in the Mas. does it have such a meaning, nor does it ever seem to have been attached to it. . . . We must also remember that the verbal expressions with which *בְּרִית* (*běrit*) is firmly linked in actual usage never have the sense of meal and cannot be understood in terms of it.”⁸

It is obvious that etymology sheds only minimal light on the meaning of the term as used by the biblical writers. Reflecting on more recent studies, Von Rad concludes,

Thus, what used to be called the “history of the conception of the covenant” has now turned out to be very involved. . . . Thus, using only the word *בְּרִית* [*beryit*] itself, that is, employing the method of investigation of terminology, it becomes more and more difficult to write a history of all the ideas which now and then may have made use of it.⁹

Nor does a comparison with the treaties of Israel’s pagan neighbors generate anything more than an occasional analogy. Rather, its usage within a given context provides the most understanding and perspective. Payne observes that basically “the meaning of the *בְּרִית* [*běrit*] must be sought not in its etymology or significance as found in pagan cultures that surrounded Israel. Only in the transformed usage of the term, as it appears in God’s own historical revelation, is its ultimate import disclosed.”¹⁰

OT usage. *Covenant* in the OT essentially incorporates a legally binding obligation.¹¹ It is employed primarily in two ways. Frequently, the covenant represents an agreement between two parties in which there is basic parity. Both sides enter into the treaty voluntarily, resulting in a partnership relationship. The OT depicts covenants of this type between individuals such as David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:3-4), between families such as Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:54), or between

⁷Gottfried Quell, “*διαθήκη*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2:107. [transliteration added]

⁸Ibid. [transliteration added]

⁹Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 1:133. [transliteration added]

¹⁰J. Barton Payne, “Covenant (in the Old Testament),” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 1:1001. [transliteration added]

¹¹Cf. Payne, “Covenant” 1:1004, and Meredith Kline, “Dynastic Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (1960):1-15. Beckwith’s conclusion that it means “a league of friendship, either between man and man or between God and man” (“God’s Covenant’s” 96) is too loose, failing to account for those covenants in which friendship at the outset was absent (cf. also Bruce Waltke, “The Phenomenon of Conditionality,” *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 123).

nations such as Israel and the Canaanites (Exod 23:32; 34:12, 15).¹² Similar terminology describes the marriage covenant (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14) or international trade agreements (1 Kgs 20:34).¹³

A second usage depicts an arrangement imposed by a superior on subordinates (e.g., Joshua 9; 1 Sam 11:1-2). It usually designates an agreement made *to* or *for*, not *with*, the subordinate, depicting a legally binding promise which one party makes toward another. In other words, parity between the two parties is absent. Second Kings 11:4 describes a covenant made by Jehoida the priest and the Carites to protect young Joash from the wicked queen Athaliah. Ezra 10:3 speaks of making “a covenant with our God to put away all the [foreign] wives and their children.”¹⁴

This type of legally binding promise is occasionally made between men or by men toward God. But it is more often a legally binding promise made by God toward men. Though covenants among/between peers were usually negotiated, covenants between God and men were not. Men do not have parity with God.¹⁵ Thus in the covenants of God, it is God alone who sets forth the conditions. “The original idea of a covenant comes directly to expression in the phraseology: God ‘establishes the covenant’ (עָשָׂה [ʿēkîm]), he ‘grants it’ (נָתַן [nātan]), Gen. vi.18, ix.9, 11f., 17, xvii.2, 7, 19, 21. God speaks ‘his’ covenant.”¹⁶ His sovereign will is set forth unilaterally (e.g., Jer 33: 20, 25).¹⁷

When the covenant constitutes an obligation solely by the master to the servant, such as the Noahic, Abrahamic, Priestly, and Davidic covenants, Waltke understands it as a *grant*. Such terminology has the advantage of emphasizing the fact that God alone was obligated to keep the tenets of the covenant. In contrast, he views the Mosaic Covenant as a *treaty*, since it constitutes an obligation of the vassal to his master.¹⁸

NT terminology and usage. The Greek term, διαθήκη (*diathēkē*), is the

¹²Job even makes a covenant with himself (31:1).

¹³The length of time covenants were binding varied, as stipulated in the agreement. The covenant of salt (Num 18:19) may intimate the permanent, non-decaying nature of a covenant as well, or may simply refer to an aspect of the covenant meal itself (so *TDNT*, 2:115).

¹⁴Cf. also 2 Kgs 23:3 and 2 Chr 29:10.

¹⁵Psalms 50:5 is not a covenant negotiated with Israel; rather, it describes the saints who have entered the covenant already established by God.

¹⁶Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 1:134, n. 10. [transliteration added]

¹⁷Waltke, following Moshe Weinfield (“The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 [1970]:185), labels the Noahic, Abrahamic, Priestly, and Davidic covenants as “grants,” constituting an obligation by the master to the servant, and the Mosaic Covenant as a “treaty” in which the vassal is obligated to his master (“Phenomenon of Conditionality” 124).

¹⁸Waltke, “Phenomenon of Conditionality” 123-24. Cf. Moshe Weinfield, “Berith—Covenant vs. Obligation,” *TDOT*, 2:255-56.

normal translation of *bĕrît* in the LXX. It occurs thirty-three times in the NT, seventeen in Hebrews, nine in the letters of Paul, four times in the Synoptic Gospels, twice in Acts, and once in Revelation. In Hellenistic times, the term exclusively meant “last will and testament,”¹⁹ making it a difficult translation for the OT *bĕrît*. On the one hand, it is true that some essential characteristics of a last will and testament are present in God’s covenants with His people. First of all, “it is the declaration of one person’s will, not the result of an agreement betw. two parties, like a compact or contract. . . . In the ‘covenants’ of God, it was God alone who set the conditions.”²⁰ Secondly, the element of God’s grace comes through. “What is indubitable is that in every reference to *diathēkē*, God’s saving work is prominent.”²¹ Hence *covenant* is useful to translate *diathēkē* if this be kept in mind.

On the other hand, the translation is difficult since a last will and testament requires the death of the one making it before it can become operative. The OT covenant did not require the death of the testator to initiate it. On the contrary, the death of one of the parties establishing the covenant rendered it null and void. Furthermore, until the death of the testator, the testament remained revocable, subject to change. Such mutability is an inappropriate attribution to God’s covenants. The one alternative translation, *συνθήκη* (*synthēkē*), was even more objectionable to the translators. Vos observes,

This word suggests strongly by its very form the idea of coequality and partnership between the persons entering into the arrangement. . . . The translators felt this to be out of keeping with the tenor of the Old Testament Scriptures, in which the supremacy and monergism of God are emphasized. So, in order to avoid the misunderstanding, they preferred to put up with the inconveniences attaching to the word “*diathēkē*.”²²

Vos adds that while “testament” in Roman law was not in force until the death of the testator (cf. Heb 9:16), the translators possibly had in mind the Graeco-Syrian law. “This kind of testament had no necessary association with the death of the testator. It could be made and solemnly sanctioned during his life-time, and

¹⁹Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University Press, 1968) 182.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Hans Hubner, “Covenant: NT,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Brill, 1998) 712.

²²G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 34. He adds: “The original sense [of *διαθήκη*, *diathēkē*] was quite generic, viz., ‘a disposition that some one made for himself’ (from the middle form of the verb *diatithēmi*). . . . Though *diathēkē* meant currently ‘last will,’ the original generic sense of ‘disposition for one’s self’ cannot have been entirely forgotten even in their day. The etymology of the word was too perspicuous for that. They felt that *diathēkē* suggested a sovereign disposition, not always of the nature of a last will, and repristinated this ancient signification.”

certain of its provisions go into immediate effect.”²³

Covenant Phraseology

A number of OT phrases describe the covenant event. Jeremiah 34:10 speaks of *entering a covenant* (בָּאֵן בְּבְרִית [bā'û babbĕrît]). In Dan 9:27, antichrist is said to *impose by force* a covenant (הִגְבִּיר בְּרִית [higbîr bĕrît]) with Israel at the outset of the Tribulation period. God instructs Noah to build an ark (Gen 6:18), promising Noah that “I will *establish* My covenant (אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אֶעֱמָד, *hĕqimōti 'eth-bĕrîtî*) with you.” Elsewhere He says “I will *give* בְּרִיתִי אֶתֶּנָּה, *'ittēneh bĕrîtî*) My covenant” (Gen 17:2), *establish* (לִי שָׂם בְּרִית עוֹלָם, *bĕrît 'ôlam šam lî*) it (2 Sam 23:5), and command (צַוָּה עוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ, *šiwwāh lĕ 'ôlam bĕrîtô*) it (Ps 111:9).

But the predominant verb associated with covenant-making is *כָּרַת* (*kārath*, “to cut”). The frequency of this phrase almost certainly owes its origin to the ancient practice in which the parties ratifying the covenant would cut a sacrifice in pieces and then walk between them (e.g., Gen 15:12-18). So common was this practice that 1 Sam 22:8 uses the term “cut” itself as a synonym for covenant making.²⁴

Covenant Pledges

When two parties entered into a covenant they occasionally offered a pledge or gift as a part of the ratification. Abraham gave sheep and oxen to Abimelech to confirm their covenant and assure his ownership rights to the well he had dug at Beersheba. A more modern assertion of fidelity to a covenant is reflected in Ezek 17:18, where Zedekiah pledged allegiance by giving his hand. Jonathan sealed his covenant with David when he gave David his robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt (1 Sam 18:4).²⁵ Sometimes, oaths or solemn promises were given as pledges of fidelity (e.g., Gen 21:23-24, 31; 26:28; 2 Kgs 11:4) as well. Even God is mentioned as having sworn an oath when He reiterated His covenant with Israel prior to entering the land (Deut 29:12, 14) and when He promised David a perpetual throne (Ps 89:3, 34-37, 49).

Covenant Signs

Another occasional feature was the sign of the covenant. Though similar to a pledge or gift, which was given when enacting a human covenant, the sign of a divine covenant was generally a repeatable memorial. God placed a rainbow in the sky for Noah and subsequent generations, promising that He would never again

²³Ibid.

²⁴Some have associated the term with the covenant meal, an event occasionally practiced when making a covenant (e.g., Gen 26:30; 31:44-46, 54; Exod 24:8-11).

²⁵“By taking the clothes and weapons of Jonathan, David takes a substantial share in his person. Entering into a covenant with him, he becomes as the man himself [literally, “as his soul” 18:3]” (Quell, “διαθήκη” 2:112). Although strict covenant language is absent, 1 Kgs 9:16 depicts marriage between two royal houses as another pledge which seals a covenant. Note also Mal 2:14 and Ezek 16:8.

destroy the earth by flood (Gen 9:14-17). He commanded circumcision as a perpetual reminder to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:9-10, 13-14). Later, He instituted the Sabbath at Mt. Sinai as a sign of His covenant with Israel (Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:12, 20).

Covenant Witnesses

Frequently, covenants between individuals were said to be divinely witnessed. David's covenant with Jonathan was made "before the LORD" (1 Sam 23:18; cf. 1 Sam 20:8). Laban, when making a covenant with Jacob, repeatedly reminded his son-in-law that though "no man is with us, God is witness between you and me" (Gen 31:50; cf. v. 53).²⁶ Calling God to witness a covenant agreement may be the reason why many covenant oaths between individuals were solemnized in the house of the LORD (e.g., 2 Kgs 11:4; 2 Chr 23:3; Jer 34:15).²⁷

Covenant Consequences

The consequences attached to the covenants, whether human or divine in origin, could be either positive or negative. Regardless of whether the covenant was motivated by friendship (as with Jonathan and David [1 Samuel 18]), suspicion (as with Laban and Jacob [Genesis 31]), or God's loving choice (as with Israel), fidelity to the covenant is its most fundamental anchor and constitutes the essence of it.²⁸ Covenants were to be remembered²⁹ and kept,³⁰ and blessings awaited those who did. God's covenants began with blessings, with even greater blessings to follow. His covenants were "front-loaded," so to speak, with divine blessings, wholly undeserved and unmerited, and secured with promises of eternal fidelity.

But they could also be rejected and broken,³¹ transgressed,³² and forsaken.³³ And the gravity of failing to honor the stipulations could be severe. Violators of the divine covenant are promised the "curses of the covenant" (Deut 29:21) and divine "vengeance" (Lev 26:25). In the case of a covenant between individuals, walking between the pieces of the sacrifice (e.g., Gen 15:12-18) provided a visual threat of similar dismemberment should the covenant obligations go unmet—a consequence ultimately realized in Judah's capture by Babylon (Jer 34:18-20). The formula,

²⁶Cf. Ezek 17:9; 2 Sam 5:3.

²⁷And when a covenant was violated, God often called upon creation to testify against the guilty party (Mic 6:1, 2).

²⁸Payne, "Covenant" 1:1002.

²⁹E.g., Gen 9:15; Exod 2:24; 6:5; Lev 26:42, 45; Deut 4:23, 31.

³⁰E.g., Gen 17:9, 10; Exod 19:5; Deut 7:9, 12; 29:9.

³¹E.g., Lev 26:15, 44; Deut 31:16, 20.

³²E.g., Deut 17:2.

³³E.g., Deut 29:25.

“may God do so to me and more also” (Ruth 1:17; 1 Sam 3:17; 20:13; 2 Kgs 6:31) probably has its origin in the reference to those who consummate a covenant by walking between a divided carcass.³⁴ Deuteronomy 28 and 30 are equally vivid in delineating the judgment that awaits disobedience. Ezekiel 17:13 describes how Nebuchadnezzar’s covenant with Jehoiakim put the Judean king under a curse (חֲלָה, *’ālah*)—an oath of imprecation—should he choose to rebel.

Covenant Conditionality

Conditionality was an integral aspect of every bilateral covenant. Failure of one of the parties to carry out the specified conditions rendered the agreement null and void. Unilateral covenants, on the other hand, wherein the LORD is the sole party responsible to carry out its obligations, are unconditional, depending totally on His faithfulness for their fulfillment.³⁵ Scripture gives five of these covenants: the Noahic, Abrahamic, Priestly (or Levitical), Davidic, and the New.

Scripture has no evidence of any obligations required of the recipients of these five covenants. It should be noted, however, that this does not deny the possible need for consequent obedience. But it does establish the fact that obedience is *not* a contingency for its fulfillment. Kaiser succinctly explains:

This is not to affirm that subsequent obedience is not required if some or all of these five covenantal benefits are to be enjoyed. On the contrary, obedience is demanded if one is to enjoy the benefits . . . ; however, failure to *participate* in the benefits will not thereby frustrate the plan of God as announced in the covenant. Even if some people do not *participate* in these benefits, they must, by virtue of their being part of Israel or (even more critically) of the messianic line, *transmit* these benefits to their successors.³⁶

Furthermore, God may bring judgment (or blessing) *locally* when there is disobedience or obedience (as in Genesis 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you and the one treating you lightly I will curse”). Waltke notes, “God’s grant of seasonal harvest and blessing are in space and time universally irrevocable, but locally and temporarily conditional upon moral behavior or providential acts.”³⁷

Though God’s unilateral, one-directional covenant making may contain similarities with man’s covenant-making, there are essential differences. Like man’s covenants, God’s covenants are in His self-interest; but God’s covenants are in the best interests of man as well—an attribute that is often lacking in man’s covenants.

³⁴Quell, “διαθήκη” 2:117. The self-malediction of Jonathan is similar (1 Sam 20:13).

³⁵Nowhere is that more vividly illustrated than in Genesis 15:12-18, where the LORD, having put Abram to sleep, walks through the pieces of the sacrifice alone.

³⁶Walter Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 51.

³⁷Waltke, “Phenomenon of Conditionality” 127.

But the primary difference is the predominant presence of grace. “The undertakings from God’s side (his promises) are signally gracious, not only because they are so great but also because they are wholly undeserved, and are often made with the offences of the other party fully in view.”³⁸ To which Perlitt insightfully adds, “The recipients of a *berit* are first blessed and then show themselves obedient.”³⁹

Number of Covenants

Scripture records numerous covenants, the vast majority established between individuals or nations. Some of these covenants may be described as “of the LORD” or “of God” (1 Sam 20:8; Prov 2:17), although the LORD Himself is not one of the covenanting parties.⁴⁰ The number of divinely initiated covenants is considerably less.⁴¹ Historically, premillennialists have placed five or six covenants in this category—Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Priestly,⁴² Davidic, and New. Classic Reformed theology, on the other hand, generally concludes that there is essentially one overarching covenant in Scripture—the “covenant of grace.”⁴³ John Walton espouses the “one covenant” perspective as well, though he views *revelation* as the objective of the covenant program, not *redemption* (as does Robertson⁴⁴). Walton argues,

In the end, revelation culminates in God’s plan of salvation, which provides the means by which relationship is achieved. But this plan of salvation is only a part, albeit a highly significant part, of the overall program of revelation. . . . The covenant is revelatory and this program of revelation eventuates in redemption.⁴⁵

³⁸Beckwith, “God’s Covenant’s” 103.

³⁹Perlitt, “Covenant” 1:711.

⁴⁰Beckwith, “God’s Covenant’s” 100.

⁴¹Beckwith (“God’s Covenant’s” 100-101), for example, lists nine.

⁴²The priestly covenant, discussed below, has at times been treated as a part of the Mosaic.

⁴³Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 2:354 ff. Though they adduce a “covenant of works,” comprising the time before the fall of man, their “covenant of grace” replaced it, unveiling God’s redemptive work from Genesis 3 through the rest of Scripture. O. Palmer Robertson (*The Christ of the Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980]) prefers the nomenclature “covenant of creation” and “covenant of redemption” (54-56), concluding that “the cumulative evidence of the Scriptures points definitely toward the unified character of the biblical covenants. God’s multiple bonds with his people ultimately unite into a single relationship. Particular details of the covenants may vary. A definite line of progress may be noted. Yet the covenants of God are one” (28).

⁴⁴Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* 63.

⁴⁵John Walton, *Covenant* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 25. Later, he adds: “I would propose that there is one covenant in two major stages, Old and New. The former is articulated in phases that are linked, yet distinct. The purpose of this one covenant is to serve as a mechanism for God’s self-revelation. That purpose is expressed in the original proclamation of the covenant in terms of Abraham

Beckwith disagrees, however. Though the covenants overlap and are consistent with each other, he claims that “this does not make the covenants identical. . . . To speak of [redemption] as the whole substance of those covenants, when they have so much in them that is more specific, is an exaggeration.”⁴⁶

Importance of the Covenants

Let no one underestimate the importance and significance of a correct understanding of the divine covenants. It is much more than an intellectual pursuit. They provide a most foundational theological anchor for understanding God’s working in human history.

- In the Noahic Covenant, God showed His gracious mercy toward all mankind, both redeemed and unredeemed, causing it to rain on the just and the unjust and assuring the ongoing, uninterrupted cycle of seasons. In it He demonstrated His unwillingness to allow the sinfulness of man to derail His plan set forth in Genesis 3:15, His unwillingness to allow the sinfulness of man to abrogate the pre-fall command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” a command reiterated after the flood to Noah.
- In the Abrahamic Covenant, God demonstrated His unmerited favor and unilateral choice of Israel as “the apple of His eye,” a special people called out from among the nations through whom the Messiah would come.
- In the Priestly Covenant, God promised the perpetual priesthood of the line of Phinehas that carries all the way through to serving in the LORD’s earthly millennial temple.
- In the Mosaic Covenant, God revealed His holiness and the heinousness of sin. The daily sacrifices provided a constant reminder of the need for the shedding of blood for the remission of sin, for the propitiating of God’s wrath.
- In the Davidic Covenant, God promised the perpetual reign of the descendants of David, ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah and His millennial reign.
- In the New Covenant, God evidenced anew His continual pouring out of grace, a promise through which He would put His law within His people, writing it on their hearts.

Understanding these six covenants will shape a person’s understanding of Scripture. It will reflect a hermeneutical course that will determine the pitch of one’s eschatological sails. Careful attention to these six covenants will bear an overwhelming abundance of fruitfulness.

When God enters into a unilateral covenant guaranteed only by His own faithfulness; when God enters into a covenant void of any human requirements to keep it in force; when God establishes a covenant that will continue as long as there

and his family serving as instruments of God’s blessing on the world” (60-61).

⁴⁶Beckwith, “God’s Covenant’s” 101.

is day and night and summer and winter, *then* great care must be taken not to erect man-made limitations that would bankrupt the heart and soul of these covenants and annul the glorious full realization of all that He promised through them. Their significance cannot be overestimated.

THE NOAHIC COVENANT

Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17

The Setting

The Noahic Covenant comes within the context of the great flood. It is recorded that “the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5), making Him “sorry He had made man” and grieving Him in His heart (Gen 6:6). As a result, “the LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky’” (Gen 6:7).

But, in contrast to the rest of mankind, it notes that “Noah found grace (חַן, *ḥēn*)⁴⁷ in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen 6:8), and as a result, God instructed him to build an ark by means of which he, his family, and “two of every living thing” would be spared. Significant aspects of God’s original creation of earth were reversed by the great flood. Yet through the flood, these same aspects would be reinstated.⁴⁸

The nature of this covenant is revealed in three passages of the Genesis account: 6:17-22; 8:20-22; and 9:8-17. This is not to suggest that there is more than one covenant. Rather, the earlier statements merely precede the actual inauguration and implementation of the covenant after the flood.

The Terminology

The divine initiation and authorization of the covenant with Noah is emphatically asserted. The text (Gen 9:9) is literally rendered, “And I, behold I am utterly establishing My covenant with you (וְאָנֹכִי הַנְּנִי מִקִּוּיִם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם), *wəʾānōkī ḥinnī mēqīm ’et bēritī ’ittēkem*,”⁴⁹ leaving no doubt as to its author. The great flood came at the bidding of the Righteous One (Gen 6:17); the same One now assures Noah and his family that He would also provide protection under the Shadow of the Almighty. God’s authorization is reasserted five times throughout the covenant (Gen 9:12, 13, 15, 16, 17). “They serve to underline the message, peeling out like

⁴⁷This is the first Scriptural occurrence of this term. Though not uncommon in the OT, Wenham notes that “it is very rare for it to be said outright that a man has found favor in God’s sight. One such example is Moses (Exod 33:17). This sentence therefore puts Noah on a par with Moses as one of the greatest saints of the old covenant . . .” (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987] 145).

⁴⁸Cp. Gen 6:7 with 8:17.

⁴⁹Cf. identical phraseology in the emphatic announcement of the flood (Gen 6:17): “And I, behold I, am bringing the great flood (וְאָנֹכִי הַנְּנִי מְבִיא אֶת־הַמַּבּוּל מֵיָם).”

bells reverberating into the future.”⁵⁰

Even the covenant-making terminology employed here is more emphatic than the more common OT nomenclature associated with making a covenant. As in Genesis 6:18, God “establishes/causes to stand His covenant (הִקְמַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי) *hēqimōthi 'et-bērîthî*.”⁵¹

The Recipients

The Noahic Covenant is the first covenant referenced in Scripture. Its first mention is in Gen 6:18 where God reveals to Noah His intention to destroy the whole earth. He includes instructions to build an ark, announcing to Noah that he and his family would be spared—“But I will establish my covenant with you.” But God actually enunciates the covenant pledge in Gen 9:8-17

In terms of recipients, it is the widest of all the covenants. The beneficiaries of this covenant encompass a wider group of recipients than the other major covenants. Initially the covenant was established with Noah and with his descendants after him (Gen 9:9). Obviously, since only Noah’s immediate family was preserved through the flood, this covenant extended to all mankind who would subsequently populate the earth. But then God enlarged the list to include “every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth” (Gen 9:10). And lest there be any question as to the extent, He adds in v. 11: “and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood.” “The reason for such detail is to make the divine concern for even the least of the creatures strongly apparent to Noah.”⁵²

In v. 13, God expanded the recipient list even further to incorporate a third element—the earth: “I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant *between Me and the earth*.” The earth had been “destroyed” (Gen 9:11). A comparison with Genesis 8:21, where the LORD said, “I will never again curse the ground on account of man,”⁵³ indicates the extent of judgment suffered by the earth

⁵⁰Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 1:195.

⁵¹Cf. “Covenant Phraseology” above. In both cases here, the Hiphil (causative) stem is employed. In 6:18, however, the tense of the verb anticipates the covenant, while in 9:9 the present participle depicts its occurrence. Wenham prefers to translate the word “to confirm,” contending, “Whereas ‘to cut’ describes the point of entry to a covenant, ‘to confirm’ is used of ratifying pre-existing ‘covenants’” (*Genesis 1–15* 1:175). W. J. Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation* [Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1984] 20-33) seeks to garner support herewith for a “covenant of creation,” while Wenham concludes that this “shows that Noah is viewed as already in a covenant relationship with God. He is not simply a perfectly righteous man; there is a covenant between him and God” (*Genesis 1–15* 1:175).

⁵²H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 1:337.

⁵³Wenham correctly asserts, “It is important to note the position of וְלֹא in this sentence, coming after לִקְלֹל to ‘curse,’ not after הִסַּח ‘do again’ as in the parallel clause ‘Never again shall I smite.’ This shows that God is not lifting the curse on the ground pronounced in 3:17 for man’s disobedience, but promising not to add to it. The flood was a punishment over and above that decreed in 3:17. This is

when it was “laid waste” by the great flood. The earth, too, as a recipient of God’s wrath in this worldwide judgment, would receive divine assurances of “never again.” The cycle of seasons after catastrophic interruption would be permanently reestablished (Gen 8:22).

The Sign

As a sign of the covenant, God placed a rainbow in the cloud (Gen 9:13, 14, 16, 17). As with other covenant signs,⁵⁴ this too was a repeatable evidence (cf. discussion above) of God’s promise to Noah. Strikingly, the sign itself incorporated an element of the judgment; it was taken from nature itself. While circumcision (Gen 17:11) and the Sabbath (Exod 31:13-17; Ezek 20:12, 20), as signs of a covenant, were intended to remind man of God’s covenant requirements, this sign is said to be for the purpose of reminding God (Gen 9:15, 16).

The use of the rainbow as a sign of the promise that the earth would not again be destroyed by a flood, according to Keil, “presupposes that it appeared then for the first time in the vault and clouds of heaven.”⁵⁵ It is possible, however, that rainbows had appeared earlier and that now they were merely given covenantal significance.⁵⁶

The Promise

Two aspects stand preeminent in the promise made to Noah—the essence of the promise and the extent of the promise. God promises that “all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen 9:11). Though the two phrases are essentially parallel, the former focuses more specifically on physical life (both human and animal) while the latter focuses on the destruction of the earth itself. Floods on a smaller scale may destroy many and cause considerable devastation, but never again will He permit worldwide destruction by means of a flood.

The promise is spoken of as an “everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם, *bērit*

further confirmed by the milder word for ‘curse,’ קלל, ‘treat lightly, disdain,’ used here as opposed to the graver term ארר, used in 3:17” (*Genesis 1–15* 1:190).

⁵⁴Circumcision was also called a “sign of the covenant” (Gen 17:11). The institution of the Sabbath is also so intimated (Ezek 20:12, 20).

⁵⁵C. F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975rp) 1:154. G. Bush concurs: “We incline upon the whole to regard this as the first appearance of the celestial arch. . . . No one can doubt that the effect upon Noah’s mind would have been far more vivid and striking had this been the first time the splendid sight had met his eye. Although the *causes* of the phenomenon existed from the creation, yet it does not necessarily follow that the *phenomenon itself* had actually appeared before” (*Notes on Genesis* [reprint; Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976] 1:157 [emphasis in the original]).

⁵⁶John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 128.

'*ôlam*, Gen 9:16).⁵⁷ The term can speak of “time without end” (i.e., eternity), but it is not always so intended. “The implication of the terminology is that these agreements are not temporary, not stopgap, nor on a trial basis. They are permanent in the sense that no other alternative arrangement to serve that purpose is envisioned.”⁵⁸ Sometimes it depicts a long, indefinite period of time, with the exact length of time determined by the context.⁵⁹ The LORD’s earlier promise to Noah, “*While the earth remains*, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Gen 8:22, emphasis added), provides the contextual clue that clarifies the meaning here. In other words, this covenant will continue until the earth is destroyed by fire (2 Pet 3:10-11; Rev 21:1).

Furthermore, the impact of the Noahic Covenant on other covenants should not be overlooked. The certainty of other covenants is, at times, anchored in the order of nature promised in this first covenant. In Jer 33:20-21, God employs the unfailing regularity of the natural order as a guarantee of the covenant with David (2 Samuel 7) and the covenant with Levi (Numbers 17; 25:10-13). Even God’s covenant of unfailing kindness and peace toward Israel is hereby assured (Isa 54:9-10).

The Priestly Covenant Numbers 25:10-13

The Setting

The Priestly Covenant⁶⁰ is set in the final end of Israel’s forty years of wilderness wanderings. Israel had come into the land of Moab, fresh from victories over the Amorites. Balak, king of Moab, consequently requested the services of the seer, Balaam, that he might “curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Num 22:6).

Unable to secure this favor from Balaam, Balak at Balaam’s instigation (Num 31:16) invited Israel “to the sacrifices of their gods” (Num 25:2), seeking thereby to subvert and assimilate Israel through idolatry and immorality—an invitation that Israel all-too-readily accepted (Num 25:3). The gravity of the situation is blatantly illustrated when one of the men of Israel took a Moabite

⁵⁷This covenant with Noah is the first of five divinely originated covenants in Scripture explicitly described as “everlasting.” The other four include the Abrahamic (Gen 17:7), Priestly (Num 25:10-13), Davidic (2 Sam 23:5), and the New (Jer 32:40). The Mosaic Covenant, though divinely initiated, is not described as everlasting.

⁵⁸Walton, *Covenant* 132.

⁵⁹Robert Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 317.

⁶⁰Some view this covenant as a development of one specific aspect of the priestly legislation given in the Mosaic Covenant, lacking the same epoch-making character as the others mentioned above (e.g., Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* 27).

woman, “in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel” (Num 25:6) into the tent, apparently to consummate the marriage.⁶¹

Seizing upon the occasion to carry out God’s command to kill all who had joined themselves to Baal of Peor (Num 25:5), Phinehas,⁶² a grandson of Aaron, rushed into the tent and executed both the man and the woman (Num 25:8).⁶³ As a result, God instructed Moses with regard to the covenant He was making with Phinehas:

Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel, in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say, “Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the sons of Israel” (Num 25:11-13).

The Terminology

Here, God tells Moses that He is “giving” (נָתַן, *nōtēn*) the covenant (Num 25:12) to Phinehas. He has acted with the zeal of the LORD, staying the hand of God’s wrath—“the zeal of Phinehas restrained the zeal of the LORD to annihilate the nation.”⁶⁴ Rather than a reward for zealous action, Allen views the covenant statement as more of a ratification. “In the case of Abram, God first chose him; then by Abram’s action of faith, the Lord confirmed his covenant with him (see Gen 12, 15, 22). In the case of Phinehas, he was already chosen by God; but in his action, God’s covenant with him is confirmed.”⁶⁵

The text adds that his action “made atonement for the sons of Israel” (Num 25:13). As noted by the intensive form of the verb כָּפַר (*kpr*, “to make substitutionary atonement”), “the atonement Phinehas had made was the sacrifice of two human

⁶¹“Tent” (תֵּבָה), used only in Num 25:8 in the OT, may have reference to the Tabernacle compound. Such an act was strictly forbidden by Levitical law and would have defiled the sanctuary. Harrison, however, believes it to be the innermost part of the family tent (R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1990] 338). Owens notes that among Bedouin it was a “little sacred tent of red leather in which the stone idols belonging to the tribe were carried” (J. J. Owens, “Numbers,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman, 1970] 150). It is possibly connected to the Arabic *al-kubbat*, from which the English “alcove” is derived (N. H. Snaith, “Leviticus and Numbers,” *The New Century Bible* [London: Thomas Nelson, 1967] 303).

⁶²Not to be confused with Eli’s son of the same name (1 Sam 1:3; 4:17).

⁶³The language intimates that Phinehas drove his spear through the man’s torso into that of his partner (cf. Harrison, *Numbers* 338). That both intermarriage and idolatry were involved is strongly suggested in 1 Cor 10:6-8.

⁶⁴Ronald Allen, “Numbers,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 922.

⁶⁵Allen, “Numbers” 922.

offenders,”⁶⁶ allowing the LORD to pardon His people and halt the spread of the plague (Num 25:8).

The Promise

First of all, the promise made with Phinehas is said to be a “covenant of peace” (Num 25:12). The Hebrew construction is unusual, making understanding difficult. It possibly denotes the peace made through Phinehas’ atoning action, causing the plague to be halted.⁶⁷

The covenant given to Phinehas included his descendants (lit., “seed,” Num 25:13). God promised him and his descendants a perpetual (דָּוָר, ‘*ḏām*)⁶⁸ priesthood, designating its enduring nature. Harrison notes, “The high priesthood promised continued among the Israelites, with the exception of an interval during the time of Eli (1 Sam 1-3; 14:3), until the final dissolution of the Jewish state in NT times.”⁶⁹ Harrison fails to note, however, that the genealogical line of Phinehas continues into the millennial kingdom through Zadok (cf. 1 Chr 6:50-53). Ezekiel indicates that the only priests permitted to minister in the millennial temple are those of the line of Zadok (44:15; 48:11). Non-Zadokian priests were prohibited from the priestly office because of past idolatrous activity (44:10).

The perpetual nature of the Priestly Covenant suggests that it should stand as a separate covenant and not a part of the Mosaic Covenant—on the basis of a number of factors. First, the terminology employed is similar to the covenants made with Noah, Abraham, David, and the New Covenant. As Allen observes of Phinehas: “He was a priest by divine right, being descended from the right family in an immediate line. He showed himself to be the rightful priest by his interest in divine righteousness. He is now confirmed priest by the rite of the divine covenant.”⁷⁰

Second, the fact that it remains when the Mosaic Covenant was rendered obsolete speaks even louder for its standing as a separate covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was abrogated by the New Covenant, but the promise given to Phinehas continues into the Millennium! Third, the language of Jer 33:20-21 places its permanence alongside the Davidic Covenant, contending that it remains in force as long as the cycle of day and night remains. “Thus says the LORD, ‘If you can break My covenant for the day, and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, *then* My covenant may also be broken with David My servant that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, *and* with the Levitical priests, My ministers’” (Jer 33:20-21, emphasis added). Feinberg concludes:

⁶⁶Harrison, *Numbers* 339.

⁶⁷Some have suggested emendation, changing the text to read “my covenant of requital” (Allen, “Numbers” 922).

⁶⁸See earlier discussion under “The Promise” of the Noahic Covenant..

⁶⁹Harrison, *Numbers* 339.

⁷⁰Allen, “Numbers” 922.

This passage has been a *crux interpretum* for expositors. It is especially difficult for those who hold an amillennial position in eschatology. The only resort for them is in allegorization of the text or the use of a dual hermeneutic. Simply stated, the passage assures that just as the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7) is guaranteed by God's promise, so is the Levitical priesthood. But whereas the amillennial system can find room for the Son of David to reign now and in the future by transferring the earthly throne to the heavenly one at the Father's right hand, it is not so easy to find Levitical priests with their ministrations in the same framework.⁷¹

Consequently, it appears best to give it its rightful place among the covenants with the others.

CONCLUSION

One's ability to understand the Bible in particular and God's dealings with humanity in general depends on how well he/she understands the biblical covenants. They are six in number: the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Priestly, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New covenants. The Noahic Covenant pertained to all mankind, not just to Israel, and promised that God would never again destroy the world by flood. He sealed His promise with the continuing sign of a rainbow. The Priestly Covenant promised a perpetual priesthood to the descendants of Levi because of the righteous act of Phinehas in freeing Israel from the consequences of God's wrath. That priesthood will continue throughout the future millennial kingdom under the rule of David's descendant. The articles to follow in this issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal* will detail the origin and implementation of the remainder of the biblical covenants.

⁷¹Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah* (Chicago: Zondervan, 1982) 237.