

Understanding the Covenant From Genesis to the Promised Land, Exile and Return

Tony Cosentino, 2007

Covenant: A Unifying Biblical Thread

The concept of Covenant is perhaps the most important key to understanding the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (OT & NT). It is like a thread, weaving its way throughout the Bible's books, and in a sense, unifying them from Genesis through Revelation into one single story. Each of the Bible's books thus reflects some aspect of the Hebrew and Christian faith communities' Covenant relationship with God.

Ancient Practice Forming Sacred Kinship Bonds

The practice of covenanting has its origins in the ancient Near-East. Leaders of nomadic tribes entered into covenant relationships with their neighbours to secure grazing or watering rights for livestock, trade privileges, safe passage through territory or protection from enemies.

To enter into covenant with someone meant more than simply signing a contract or forming an alliance. Covenants were often sealed in blood (of a slain animal) and forged a kind of kinship (familial) relationship. Such bonds were of a solemn nature, uniting partners against one another's enemies, providing military security and shared protection of one another's deities. The covenant bond was so sacred that even if one party should fail to observe its requirements, the other was bound to continue doing so. *Faithfulness* was central to the covenant tradition.

Although covenants could be made between individuals, they were often corporate in nature. A tribal elder entering into covenant agreement with another did so in the name of his or her entire community. Thus, Abraham cuts the Covenant with God in Genesis 15, binding his family and tribe to a divine Partner who can only be known by faith. In so doing, he becomes a source of blessing to his descendants, God's prized possession among all the earth's peoples.

Election: Chosen by God to Lead the Nations

An important aspect of Israel's Covenant relationship with God is that of *election*. The Creator of the universe chooses an insignificant tribe to become a *holy people*, a *light* to lead the nations into the way of peace, security and hope. Abraham, Sarah and their people thus become a model showing the rest of the world how to live in right relationship with God, neighbour and creation. Within the Covenant community, key individuals are raised up or anointed by God's Spirit to remind the entire nation of its holy calling. Noah, the Patriarchs, Moses, Judges, Prophets, John the Baptist, and finally, Jesus fill this role. Together with the faithfulness of key women such as Deborah, Ruth, Hannah, Judith, Esther and Mary remind us that *election*, as an experience of grace, when embraced will bring generations of blessing to the Covenant community.

Covenant Language: Loving-Kindness, Grace and Favour

The Hebrew biblical term *hesed* often accompanies biblical references to the Covenant. Translated as *loving-kindness*, it is *expressed in compassion and mercy*. Also closely associated with covenant language is the Hebrew word *hen*, translated as *grace and favour*. The image of God portrayed in Israel's Covenant language is of One who is faithful, merciful and abiding in gracious (unmerited) love. As the People of the Covenant, the Israelites are called to treat all other peoples, especially the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the same way.

Covenant Developments in Salvation History : Noah, Abraham and Moses

The Covenant between God and the Hebrews develops over time. After the great flood, God places His “bow” in the clouds as sign of His Covenant with Noah’s family and all peoples of the earth (Gen 9, 12-17). Abraham and the male members of his tribe are circumcised as sign of their exclusive bond with their God (Gen 17, 9-27). After deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites arrive at Mt. Sinai. Their corporate acceptance of the Law given through Moses at the foot of its slopes defines them as a nation –the People of God- and ratifies their Covenant bond with this God who reveals Himself as Deliverer and Liberator (Ex 24, 3) To live in Covenant righteousness is to live justly, that is, in *right relationship* with God and neighbour, as expressed in the Law of Moses: the written expression of the Law divinely written on all human hearts.

Covenant Developments...: Joshua and Judges

Following their travels through the Sinai desert, the People of God cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land of Canaan. There, they re-commit themselves to the Covenant and its Law, led by Joshua. Later, when Israel wanders from its Covenant worship of the one God, threats of invasion are relieved by the raising up of Judges, who rally their people militarily, and redirect their faithfulness to God alone.

The Prophets' Call to Covenant Fidelity, Refusal and Exile

When Kings rule God’s people, prophets are sent to remind them of their Covenant-bound duty to govern justly. When rulers become unjust and idolatrous, prophets are sent to admonish them, and bring comfort to the poor, widows, orphans and strangers: the Anawim YHWH, God’s little ones, object of divine preferential love. When the prophets are ignored, the Kingdom once united under David becomes divided into the Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Further failure to heed the words of Amos and Hosea is followed by the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 722 BC and deportation of its 10 tribes. Jerusalem and Judah pay no heed to 1st Isaiah (1-39), Jeremiah, Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. In 598BC, the Babylonians invade and plunder the Temple. They carry off the royal family, tradesmen, wealthy citizens and fighting-aged men in Jerusalem and Judah. Returning in 587 BC, they lay siege to the holy city. They destroy Jerusalem and its Temple; the new king and surviving citizens are deported in chains to Babylon. Loss of land, Temple and King devastate the Israelites’ sense of nationhood beyond all imagining.

Messages of Comfort (God's Fidelity) and Exhortation to Faithfulness on Return

During the exile, Second Isaiah (40-55) Ezekiel and Daniel bring messages of judgement,

comfort and hope to God's captive people. 50 years later (538 BC), a faithful remnant of Judeans (henceforth known as Jews) returns from exile to rebuild its life from the ruins. 3rd Isaiah exhorts, brings hope and comfort to Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. Malachi condemns insincere religious observance and pagan worship. Haggai and Zechariah exhort them to rebuild the Temple to bring God's blessing on their crops and economy.

United by the Scribe Ezra and Governor Nehemiah, the Jewish people renew their Covenant commitments, weeping for their sin that brought such great losses to their people. The story of Jonah reminds them that God's mercy and salvation extends to all nations, including their enemies, the Assyrians in Babylon, to whom Jonah is sent to preach repentance and God's salvation.

Throughout Israel's salvation history, God continuously reaches out to His holy people, offering them social and political stability, protection from enemies, agricultural and economic prosperity.