

Logos University

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OTS101 Old Testament Survey

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Research Paper

Defining Covenant.

A covenant is only as good as the character of the covenant maker. To really understand what covenant means we must look at the honor of the one making it. J. Rodman Williams defines covenant as “a formal, solemn and binding contract between two parties. The essential elements are those of two parties, a promise solemnly given and an obligation in the covenant’s maintenance and fulfillment.”¹

Whenever God enters into a covenant with man He takes it very seriously. It is never God who breaks covenant, but always man. Hosea 6:7 says “Like Adam, they have broken covenant, they were unfaithful to me there.” Here God says specifically, it was MY covenant that Adam broke. He takes ownership of the covenant that He made with Adam. It is totally opposite to the character of God to ever break a promise or to lie in any way. God is faithful to His word and will never violate it. God even swears by His own name to keep His promises. Hebrews 6:13-18 says “When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie.” So we can find assurance of faith in that God will always keep the covenants that He has made.” The prophet Jeremiah tells us “This is what the LORD says: ‘If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant, and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me, can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne.’”²

We will begin this study on the doctrine of covenant by examining the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as covenant in the scriptures. As we begin to understand the importance and meaning of the term covenant it will become apparent that this is an important theological truth. As we understand further how God honors and keeps the covenants that He makes we will better appreciate the heart of the Father.

The Hebrew word translated as “Covenant” is *Briyth*. According to Strong’s it relates to the sense of cutting. It also refers to a compact made by passing between pieces of flesh.³ The root word is *bara*, which simply means to cut.⁴ W.E. Vine says “ The Hebrew word *Briyth* is frequently the object of the verb *karath*, to divide or cut in two.”⁵

An example of this is seen in Genesis chapter 15 when God confirms his covenant with Abraham by walking between the divided carcasses of a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a young pigeon. He had commanded Abram to bring them to him and then when Abram had fallen asleep “a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said,”To your descendants I give this land.”

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for covenant involves cutting and separation. It is common to think only of the word covenant in the sense of coming to an agreement, but it is clear from the root meaning of this word in scripture that no agreement can be reached until a cutting or separation has taken place. The sealing of a covenant involves the shedding of blood. Hebrews 9:22 says “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Clearly then to enter into covenant relationship with God is only made possible by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Only by separating ourselves from the world may we know the fellowship of the Lord. Only as we

experience the cutting of our hearts by the Holy Spirit can we enter into covenant relationship with our heavenly Father.

The Greek word translated covenant is “*diatheke*”. According to Strong’s the meaning indicates a disposition, a will, a testament or a contract. It indicates to put apart, or to dispose.⁶ As with the Hebrew word for covenant a separation is necessary before the agreement or contract can be established. In the issuing of a will or testament it is required that a death take place before the dictates of the will can be received. Hebrews 9:16-18 says “In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when someone has died, it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.” The Greek word translated, will in the NIV, here is *diatheke*.

Wayne Grudem, in his book Systematic Theology writes, “The New Testament authors did not use the ordinary Greek word for contracts or agreements in which both parties were equal, *syntheke*, but rather chose a less common word, *diatheke*, which emphasized that the provisions of the covenant were laid down by one of the parties only. In fact the word *diatheke* was often used to refer to a testament or will that a person would leave to assign the distribution of his or her goods after death.”⁷ From this we understand that the covenant that we now have with God is based solely on the Mercy and Goodness of God and on the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Grudem defines a covenant as “an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.”⁸

We will now examine one of the major covenants that God made with man. We will examine this covenant in each of five elements. Those are 1. Parties, 2 Promise, 3.Ratification, 4. Obligation, and 5. Fulfillment.

One of the first covenants we find in scripture is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Genesis 15:18 says “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt,…” The parties involved were first God and Abram. However this covenant was also extended to Abram’s seed. First to his natural seed, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ, also to his spiritual seed.

There are two promises in this covenant. First God promised Abraham a great number of descendants. Genesis 15:5 says “Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your seed be.” The second promise referred to land. Genesis 17:8 says “the whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you, and I will be their God. I believe that this promise for land also refers to spiritual land. The land that God desires to possess is the soil of the human heart. Only as we are fully inhabited by his presence do we know the full satisfaction of this covenant.

God himself ratified this covenant. In Genesis chapter 15 we read of the account when God told Abraham to bring Him the carcasses of various animals and then the terrible presence of God came and walked between the pieces. “The dreadfulness of God’s own personal presence, with the strange and mysterious smoking firepot and flaming torch moving among the torn pieces, doubtless representing God’s immediate presence in coming sufferings and privations. Such was the vivid ratification of the covenant made with Abraham.”⁹

The obligation required by God in this covenant was circumcision. God declared to Abraham in Genesis 17, “as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your seed after you, throughout all generations. Every male among you shall be circumcised. It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” As New covenant believers we are not commanded to any longer have this physical circumcision, but are encouraged to be those who have a circumcised heart before the Living God.

The fulfillment of this covenant is twofold. The first promise for many descendants is fulfilled each time another person embraces Christ as their personal Savior. He then becomes a child of Abraham and a Son of God. The second promise for land is fulfilled as believers in Christ possess and occupy the Kingdom of God and make spiritual advances into the dominion of darkness. As believers begin to walk in the promises of God new land is possessed in the heart and in the Kingdom of God.

In conclusion of this brief study on covenant a comparison must be made between what is referred to as the Old Covenant and what is referred to as the New Covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.”

The parties involved are God and Israel. This extends to physical Israel but also to spiritual Israel. That is all those who today are of the household of faith. Ephesians 3:6 says “This mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The promise is for a new covenant. One that was to be internal, not external. God was promising to do a work in the heart of man. The Old Covenant involved external works and was only a type and shadow of the New. It involved the shedding of the blood of animals and only an external forgiveness of sin. The Old Testament covenant of a continual offering up of sacrifices and a strict obedience to the law was to be replaced by an inward work of the heart.

The ratification of this New Covenant was once again by the shedding of blood. However this time it was not animal’s blood that was to be offered. Hebrews 9:11-14 says “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man made. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially clean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” The new covenant was sealed and ratified in the blood of Christ.

The obligation for this covenant is faith. We are asked to put our faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. We are asked to believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths that

Jesus Christ is Lord. We are then instructed to put off the old man of the flesh and live a new life that glorifies the one who died in our place.

The fulfillment of this covenant took place when Christ cried out from the cross, "It is Finished." God accepted the death of Christ as penalty for the sins of all those who would believe on His son. As we accept Christ as our savior He applies the blood of Christ to our sins, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts and we enter into covenant relationship with the Living God. God's desire to have fellowship with man can now be realized and is the most precious thing a man can have.

- 1 Williams, J. Rodman, God, the World and Redemption, Zondervan, 1988 pg.275
- 2 Jeremiah 33:20-21 (NIV2011)
- 3 Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, pg 24 Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary.
- 4 Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, pg 23 Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary.
- 5 Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words. Pgs. 52-53
- 6 Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, pg. 22 Greek dictionary of the New Testament.
- 7 Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Zondervan, 1994 pg. 515
- 8 Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Zondervan, 1994 pg. 515
- 9 Williams, J. Rodman, God, the World and Redemption, Zondervan, 1988 pg.285