

# The Covenants of God

## INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible, called the Old Testament by Christianity, tells the story of the God of Israel and the Israel of God. This story is the foundation and basis for all that is claimed in the Gospels and Epistles held sacred by Christianity. Within the Hebrew Bible are the covenants made by God with Israel. There are five primary covenants that must be understood to place the New Testament writings into proper perspective. These covenants have been named differently by commentators but regardless of the name used, the covenants are easy to understand.

The first is the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1-17). The Noahic covenant is made with Noah and his offspring as well as all living creatures including birds, animals and beasts of the land. It also includes the earth itself and therefore the nations that came from the offspring of the three sons of Noah.

The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:1-22) was made with Abraham and was then confirmed to his sons Isaac (Gen. 26:2-6) and Jacob, also called Israel (Gen. 28:10-22). This covenant created a chosen people, a specific lineage and a testimony of God (light) among the nations.

The third covenant is the one made with the Children of Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:1-17). Often called the Mosaic covenant, this covenant established the relationship between God and Israel at Sinai and was confirmed by the next generation (Deut. 29:1-15) as they were about to enter the Land promised to Abraham 400 years earlier.

The fourth covenant (II Samuel 7:8-16) was made with David, the son of Jesse who became king of Israel after Saul. God's covenant with David included the establishment of a throne that would be established forever. This would be confirmed and given to the son of David.

The fifth covenant is called the New Covenant and is found in the writings of Jeremiah (31:27-37). This covenant would accomplish what had failed in the former one at Sinai. This covenant was confirmed by Jesus at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20).

Replacement theology views the New Covenant as a replacement of the Mosaic Covenant and a removal and negation of the Law or Torah. That is an error. In fact, such a claim is a direct contradiction of Jesus' own statement that he did not come to annul the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them (bring them to full operation). To fully understand how he will do this requires that we look at the details of each of the five covenants.

Another errant view is the notion of a dual covenant, one for Israel and one for the nations. The Covenants do not replace each other or parallel each other. They unfold like a blossom. Each one builds upon the previous covenant and both fulfills and expands the previous one. Fulfillment is not replacement. It is a move toward bringing something to full operation and manifestation. All of the covenants will come to full operation and fulfillment in the Messianic Kingdom to come. Then and only then will the present creation and its covenants pass away.

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## THE COVENANT WITH NOAH

The major covenants of God begin with the covenant made with Noah. According to II Peter 3:3-7, there is a distinction between the “former heavens and earth” and the present heavens and earth. The former one from long ago were created in the beginning and was destroyed, being flooded with water. The “present heavens and earth” are reserved for fire and kept for judgment and destruction of ungodly men”. In vs 13 we are told to anticipate new heavens and a new earth in the future. This understanding is foundational to the covenant with Noah.

The Noahic covenant is found in Gen. 8:20-9:17. After the flood, Noah exits the ark and builds an altar to the Lord and offers burnt offerings. The Lord makes a promise that the earth will not be flooded again because of man’s sin. This covenant made is with Noah, his sons and all human descendants. It also is made with all the living creatures: birds, cattle and beasts of the earth. This is to all the generations.

The specific covenant is that the present earth will remain and while it remains, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter and day and night will continue. This uniformitarianism will establish the boundaries of the present heavens and earth and a flood will never again destroy all life.

The sign of the covenant is the rainbow which will be seen in the cloud and God will see it and remember and it will be the sign that God will keep his covenant. It is traditional in Judaism and Christianity to see and recognize by a blessing or prayer the covenant of God in the rainbow.

The obligation of man in this covenant is connected with blood. Human life must not be taken by man or animal. Animal life may be taken for food, but the blood may not be consumed with the meat. This focus on life and blood will be continued and expanded in the covenants to follow.

This covenant with Noah is important because it is used in the scripture to connect with the other four covenants. We will see in each of those covenants a claim that as long as day and night, season and the earth remain, God will maintain the covenants with Abraham, Israel, David and the New Covenant described by Jeremiah. One example will be given here.

In Jeremiah 33:24-26 God claims that the covenant with Abraham, David and Moses will be rejected if and only if His covenant with day and night and his fixed patterns of heaven and earth are not in place. Of course that will not be. This places the other covenants as valid as long as the present heavens and earth stand and becomes a significant pattern in the scriptures regarding the continuation of the covenants. It demonstrates that the covenant with Noah is foundational to and joined with the others. Next we will consider the covenant with Abraham.

## THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Abram was told by God to leave his family and homeland and go to a place God would show him. God promised to make him a great nation and a source of blessing for all the families of the earth (the descendants of Noah) (**Gen. 12:1-3**). After many years, when Abram was 99 years old, God changed his name to Abraham and made a covenant with him (**Gen. 17:1-21**). The covenant was specific.

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God's part of the covenant was to make Abraham fruitful. He would be a father of nations. This covenant would be continued through Abraham's descendants after him. God also said He would give the Land of Abraham's wanderings to his descendants as an everlasting possession. The Holy Land specifically included the land of Canaan. In essence, the Abrahamic covenant obligated God to be God to the descendants of Abraham and they would inherit the Land of Promise. This establish the link between the Holy God, the Holy People and the Holy Land.

Abraham's part of the covenant was to undergo circumcision along with all of his household (born or bought) and this was to continue to be practiced in all their generations. Males were to be circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of life and if that was not observed, that person would be cut off from the people and the promises of the covenant.

God also changed the name of Abraham's wife from Sarai to Sarah and established that the descendants of the Abrahamic covenant would be through Abraham and Sarah (not Abraham and Hagar). Abraham asked God to use Ishmael, his son through Hagar, because of his and Sarah's age. He and Sarah laughed at the idea that they would become parents. God affirmed His promise and told them to call the child "Laughter" (Isaac: Yitzhak).

God confirmed the Abrahamic covenant with Isaac (**Gen. 26:2-6**) and with Jacob **Gen. 28:10-22**). In each case the covenant continues the promise of peoplehood and possession of the Land. The sign of this covenant continues to be circumcision.

The Abrahamic covenant is not replaced by the covenant of Moses (**Gal. 3:17-18**). The Abrahamic covenant and promises are as valid now as when the covenant was made. In fact the Abrahamic covenant was enforced by God with regard to Moses who failed to circumcise his own son (**Ex. 4:24-26**). This is also, in part, why Paul tells Gentiles not to undergo Abrahamic circumcision as part of their calling to Messiah. (**I Cor. 7:17-20**). Jewish and Gentile identity is not to be confused or annulled, even in the New Covenant. The Blessings promised to Abraham on behalf of the Gentiles (nations) are directed to those nations, not to Israel, though they will come through Israel. The descendants of Abraham will be blessed by God directly and are found in the Mosaic Covenant which we will discuss next.

## THE MOSAIC COVENANT

On the basis of the Abrahamic covenant and based upon a promise made to Abraham (Gen. 15), God delivered the Children of Israel (offspring of Abraham) from Egypt and established a covenant with them at Sinai. God used Moses as the deliverer and mediator of the covenant between Israel and God. This covenant is not a covenant of salvation. It is a covenant of "Blessing and Cursing" based on faith and obedience between God and Israel. It also makes a clear promise that God will remain faithful to them regarding the Abrahamic Covenant made to the Fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

The Mosaic Covenant is similar to a Ketubah (Marriage Contract) and a Vassal Contract being made between God as Husband and King and with Israel as his wife and people. It spells out the parameters of the relationship between them which is summarized in Ex. 19 and 20. It includes blessings and security in

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the Land for faithful obedience (Deut. 28) and curses and exile for faithless disobedience as described in Deut. 27.

The Covenant also includes a promise that even though they will not be able to keep this covenant fully and will eventually be removed from the Land of promise, God will punish them and scatter them among the nations but He will not forsake them. From their exile, God will circumcise their hearts and they will turn to Him. He will gather them back and atone for His people and the land (Deut. 30-33). This promise is to confirm and keep His promise to Abraham.

The generation that made this covenant with God at Sinai was not able to enter into the Land. The next generation reaffirmed the covenant and entered the Land under Joshua. Each generation of Israel, in the Land or in Diaspora, must confirm the Abrahamic covenant by the circumcision of their males and confirm the Mosaic Covenant by binding the words of God on their forehead and hands. Though they are uneven in their faithfulness to the covenant, God remains faithful to His part and the promises in each of the covenants.

The promises of this covenant must be fulfilled. Jesus (Yeshua) says (Matt. 5:17-19) that until heaven and earth passes away (based on the covenant with Noah) the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will not pass from the Torah (Mosaic covenant) until it is all fulfilled. God through the prophets said that as long as heaven and earth remains consistent with the Noahic Covenant, Israel will remain a people before Him. The Mosaic covenant is not a replacement of the covenants with Noah and Abraham. It is dependent upon them and along with them is presently in effect. As we will see in the below, the Davidic Covenant also affirms and expresses the ones which went before it. And we will ultimately see that the New Covenant fulfills rather than merely replaces the previous covenants. Christianity errors severely when it attempts to claim that the New Covenant has presently replaced the Covenant at Sinai.

## THE COVENANT WITH DAVID

The Davidic Covenant is related to the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. It specifically addresses the Messianic Kingship through the line of David. David is promised a house (dynasty) as King of Israel and his son (Solomon) will build the House of the Lord (Temple). This throne of David will be forever and the people of Israel will dwell in their own land undisturbed (II Samuel 7:8-17).

The Covenant has immediate and future Messianic connections. Solomon, as Son of David will build the Temple. But the Messiah, as Son of David, will rule over Israel in peace and security for ever. This establishes the continuation of the Torah, the Temple worship and priesthood, and the covenant of Sinai into the Messianic Kingdom to come. But this has not been continuous in history and requires a restoration and renewal.

That restoration is described by the prophet Amos. He declares that after the diaspora of Israel, God will raise up the Tent (booth) of David and raise its ruins. This will restore the Kingdom of Israel and include Nations (Gentiles) called by God's Name (Amos 9:11-15). He goes on to state that Israel will again be in the Promised Land in blessing and peace never again to be rooted out of their land.

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The Gospels in the Newer Testament claim that the beginning of this restoration is connected to Jesus (Yeshua) as Messiah (King of Israel). Mary is told that her son Jesus would be great and that the Lord God would give him the throne of his father David and that he would reign in his kingdom over the house of Jacob (Israel) forever (Luke 1:26-33). Luke goes on to explain in the book of Acts how the early Jewish disciples responded to the Gentiles turning to the God of Israel through the Gospel of Jesus as consistent with the Amos prediction. Jesus would soon reign on the throne of David over the house of Israel and that kingdom would include the Gentiles called by the Lord's Name. As a result, they gave certain commands to the Gentile believers that connected them to Israel but maintained their Gentile identity (Acts 15:13-21).

The obvious conclusion is that the future holds a time when this will all be completed. Jesus will return to Jerusalem, all Israel (dead and alive) will be gathered to the Land of Promise, the Gentiles will be included, and the Kingdom will be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6). At that time, the Messiah will reign from Jerusalem upon the throne of David and the Torah will go forth from Zion and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. The nations will stream to the House of the God of Jacob and will never again learn war (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Replacement theology misses this covenant by claiming that the throne of David is in heaven and the Israel of God is the church and the Kingdom does not include a restoration of Israel in the Land. The claim is made that God is finished with Israel and that Israel is not a people before God because they rejected the Gospel. But this is a false claim. Jeremiah makes it clear that this will be fulfilled. The righteous Branch of David will execute justice and righteousness in the earth (not heaven) and the throne of David and the Levitical priesthood will continue with all the sacrifices at the Temple (Jer. 33:14-18).

He goes on to say that as long as the Noahic covenant remains unbroken (the fixed patterns of heaven and earth), so the Davidic covenant remains unbroken and those who reject the idea that God remains faithful to Israel and Judah are mistaken (Jer. 33: 23-26). All of this leads to the ultimate covenant of God – The New Covenant which we will examine next.

## THE NEW COVENANT

God set the parameters of the present creation through the Covenant with Noah. He established his people through whom He would restore the creation through the covenant with Abraham. At Sinai, He began the covenant of blessings and curses with His people Israel. In the Davidic covenant he affirmed the Kingdom of Israel with the Son of David and the Levitical priesthood. While each of these covenants have remained valid and in force, none of them have been brought into full and complete manifestation. This ultimate fulfillment of the covenants requires a final and ultimate covenant that will complete and fulfill all of the others. This is called the New Covenant.

The New Covenant was anticipated in the Mosaic Covenant reconfirmed at Moab (Deut. 30). It is announced and explained in Jeremiah 31:31-37. This covenant called a "new covenant" is to be made with the House of Israel and the House of Judah (Gentiles are not mentioned). It will be different than the Sinai covenant in that it will not be broken by Israel and Judah. In this covenant, God will place his Law (Torah) on their hearts resulting in the full manifestation that He is their God and they are His people.

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This covenant will not require proclamation or evangelization. They will not tell each other to know the Lord because they will all know Him from the greatest to the least. And they will be forgiven.

This covenant is needed because the one at Sinai is flawed. Not the Torah. The covenant is flawed because of the flesh. What the Law cannot do because of the weakness of the flesh, God will do in sending His Son, the Messiah to accomplish. That is the heart of the Good News (Gospel) which is related to the New Covenant but is not the New Covenant. So the New Covenant will complete and fulfill the other covenants and bring full restoration and salvation to God's creation. This will be accomplished in the Messiah and through the people of Israel. This requirement that It is directly related to Israel is found in this same Jeremiah passage (31:35-37). God addresses the covenant with Noah by saying that if the fixed order of the sun and moon and the creation can be measured and explored fully, then and only then would Israel cease to be a people or be cast off. While the creation stands, Israel stands as the people of God. And the New covenant will bring all the promises to full operation.

Jesus addresses this himself when he declares that he has not come to annul the Law or the prophets but to bring them into full operation (Matt. 5:17-19). He also claims that none of it has or will pass away, let alone be replaced until it is fulfilled and this will remain as long as the creation (heaven and earth) remains. It is clear that the New Covenant fulfills the others rather than replaces them.

At the Last Supper during Passover, Jesus took the elements of the Seder and claimed that they were the establishment of the New Covenant. He spoke of this cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood. His death and resurrection would bring about the establishment of the New Covenant with Israel and Judah. And through the mystery of the Gospel, this would also include Gentiles in the promise of full restoration.

## THE GOSPEL AND THE COVENANTS

The Gospel is related to the New Covenant and the ultimate fulfillment of all the covenants of God. The Gospel emerges in the book of Isaiah 40:1-11. This text brings comfort to Israel and "Good News" that the glory of the Lord is about to be revealed. A "voice crying in the wilderness" will call to prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord God will come, and like a shepherd, tend His flock. This text is followed by the description of the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 42).

Isaiah continues to express this hope to Israel and mentions the "Good News" again in chapter 52. "How lovely on the mountain is the feet of him who brings good news announcing peace". The Lord will show His salvation in the sight of the Nations and the God of Zion will reign and restore Jerusalem. This is followed by a description of the Servant of the Lord suffering (Isaiah 53).

The good news (Gospel) being announced here is that God will accomplish His word to Israel and redeem them and restore them to the Land of promise. They will live in peace and their sins will be forgiven. This is good news indeed. And it requires the coming of the servant of the Lord who will suffer to remove sin. This is consistent with the notion that salvation is not about going to heaven, but the full restoration of the creation through the Messiah of Israel.

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The Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) base their message on the Isaiah prophesy. Each begins with the coming of John the Baptizer who claims to be that “voice crying in the wilderness”. He is not the Messiah but announces the coming and the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. John identifies Yeshua (Jesus) as the One who will give the Holy Spirit. This One is the suffering servant, the promised one who, like Joseph, will be misunderstood by his brothers and through his rejection and suffering, become their salvation and comfort.

The Gospel writers demonstrate that Yeshua is both the suffering one (Son of Joseph) and the coming one (Son of David) who will reign in the restored Kingdom. His birth is described to the shepherds as “good news” of great joy which shall be for all the people (first to Israel, then the Gentiles). For today in the city of David is born to you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord”. (Luke 2:10-11).

The Gospel is the “good news” that this suffering one has died, once for all, to put away the sin of Israel and of the whole world, and because of His resurrection, He has conquered death. He ascended into heaven as the great high priest of the order of Melchizedek. He is now seated at the right hand of God and will return to restore the Kingdom to Israel and also to restore the whole creation of God as King of Kings and Lord of Lords on the throne of David his father in Jerusalem.

This return will include the gathering of Israel from the nations of their Diaspora (both the living and the dead) and so, all Israel will be saved. In this, all of the covenants will be brought into full operation and fulfillment. And the Gentiles will be included through what Paul calls the mystery of the Gospel. That will be discussed below.

## THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL

There is a mystery, hidden in God, from ages past that has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Paul speaks of this mystery in the book of Ephesians (3:1-7). He gives a clear and specific statement of the Mystery of Messiah – that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promises in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) through the Gospel.

This mystery unfolded in the events described in the Book of Acts. It is difficult for many Christians to appreciate the impact of this mystery, even though it is foundational to our inclusion in Messiah. This is because we read the Biblical texts (Both Old Testament and New) as if they are directed to us (Replacement Theology). But they are directed to the Jew first. This is true of the entire Biblical revelation (Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, and Epistles). It is true of the Gospel message and the coming Judgment of God that was preached by Jesus and His apostles. We Gentiles are included but we do not replace Israel. Even the writings of Paul can be misunderstood if read as a text written to Christians. They are texts written to followers of the God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua, both Jews and Gentiles, bound together in Messiah, in anticipation of the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel which includes the blessing of the nations.

So the common error of Christians is to read the Biblical texts, not as extended to us, but as directed primarily to us, and only to Israel if they become like us. That is the fundamental error of replacement theology. And to make things worse there is emerging in the Messianic movement an overreaction to

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replacement theology that treats Gentile believers as virtually the same as Jewish believers. This is also an error. The Gospel is good news to Israel that the promises made to them through the fathers is about to come into fullness. And the mystery of the Messiah includes the blessings extending to the Gentiles so that we are fellow recipients as Gentiles.

Paul describes this mystery this way. We Gentiles are fellow heirs. To be fellow heirs is not to say that the inheritance is identical. A firstborn often inherited more than other brothers. It does mean, however, that we Gentiles are included in the inheritance. Paul further states we are fellow members of the body. In Messiah, we are included in the people of the messiah and members of one another. But we have gifts, functions and roles that differ. Equal membership does not imply that we are the same. Finally, Paul says we are fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel. The promise of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and resurrection at the last day are also ours along with Israel. We will sit down in the Kingdom with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not as a replacement of Israel but as an extension of God's people, called for His Name.

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