

Covenant: How the Bible Hangs Together
Resurrection OPC | Adult Sunday School | Spring 2020
March 15, 2020

Week 1: What is a Covenant?

- Human-to-Human Covenants (בְּרִית, *berith*) in the Bible¹
 - Joshua 9:11, 15-16, 18a—“So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, ‘Take provisions in your hand for the journey and go to meet them and say to them, ‘We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us.’” ... And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them. At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were their neighbors and that they lived among them.... But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel.”
 - 1 Kings 5:12—“And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him. And there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty (*berith*.)” (NASB “made a covenant”)
 - Genesis 14:12-13—“Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies [literally “partners of the covenant”] of Abram.”
 - 1 Samuel 18:3-4—“Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.” 23:18—“And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.”
 - Proverbs 2:16-17—“So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.”
Malachi 2:14—“The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.”
 - Human-to-God covenants? “Covenant renewal” (2 Kings 11:17; 2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chron 29:10)²
- The Cultural Context: Ancient Near-Eastern Analogies
 - Hittite (1450-1180 B.C.) Suzerainty Treaties³
 - Preamble (name of the great king)
 - Historical Prologue (past actions grounding the relationship)
 - Stipulations (service the vassal owed)
 - Sanctions (penalties for violating the stipulations)
 - Deposit of treaty tablets with provision for “periodic public reading”
 - “Royal charter”/ “Land Grant”⁴
 - Limitations of analogies
 - Don’t absolutize or over-extrapolate legitimate comparisons (similarities don’t imply equivalence)
 - The uniqueness of biblical covenants
*“The very fact that Scripture speaks of ‘divine’ covenants, covenants made by God with his people, may be of great significance in itself. Apparently this phenomenon of divine covenants does not appear outside Israel. ‘Outside the Old Testament we have no clear evidence of a treaty between a god and his people.’ ... ‘There are no convincing parallels in the pagan world ...’ to the covenants of God with man as found in the Bible.”*⁵

¹ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 130-2.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 9.

³ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 25-28.

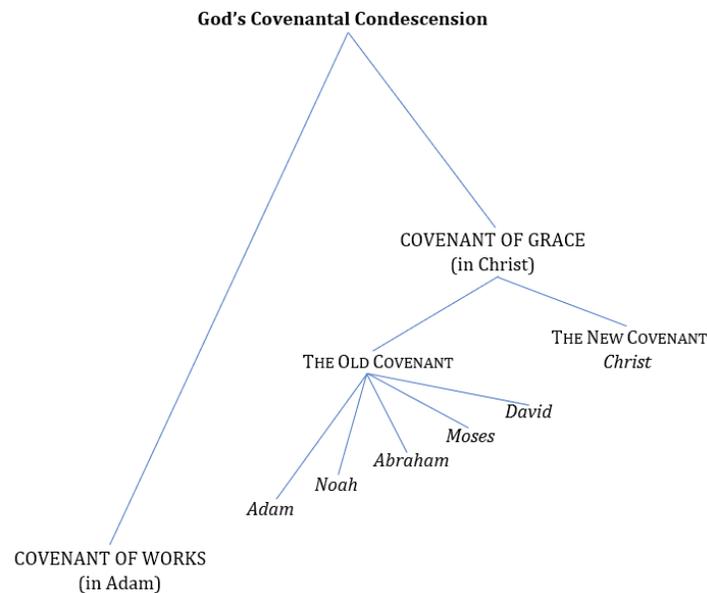
⁴ Gentry & Wellum, 133.

⁵ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 4, quoting Ronald E. Clements, *Abraham and David*, 83, then David Noel Freedman, “Divine Commitment and Human Obligation,” *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 420.

- A few definitions and descriptions of “covenant”
 - “A relationship of ‘oaths and bonds’” involving “mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments.”⁶
 - “An enduring agreement which defines a relationship between two parties involving a solemn, binding obligation(s) specified on the part of at least one of the parties toward the other, made by oath under threat of divine curse, and ratified by a visual ritual.”⁷
 - “A relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by His word.”⁸
 - “A stunning blend of both law and love.... A relationship much more intimate and loving than a mere legal contract could create, yet one more enduring and binding than personal affection alone could make. It is a bond of love made more intimate and solid because it is legal.”⁹
 - “A bond in blood sovereignly administered”¹⁰
 - “Bond” = binding relationship
 - Binding oaths
 - Symbolic actions (various: gifts, memorials, meals, sprinkling blood, sacrifices, passing under a rod, dividing animals)
 - “In blood” = “life-and-death bond”
 - “Cutting” covenants: Jeremiah 34:18-20
 - Blood sacrifice
 - “Sovereignly administered” = initiated and/or enforced by God

Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.



⁶ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 10.

⁷ Paraphrase of definition by Daniel C. Lane, “The Meaning and Use of the Old Testament Term for ‘Covenant,’” in Gentry & Wellum, 132.

⁸ The First Catechism, Q. 24, Great Commission Publications

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, 104.

¹⁰ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 4ff.