

# **BIBLICAL COVENANTALISM:**

## **How the Biblical Covenants Drive the Bible's Storyline**

### The Nature of Biblical Covenants

The covenants of Scripture should not be understood via ANE treatises.

“The book of Genesis may well embody a concept of covenant that is uniquely biblical and differs radically from the legal concept in terms of reciprocal obligations.”

- Jakob Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny: A Theology of Human Destiny*, 32. My emphasis.

“The Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*, but it is doubtful how much light modern critical studies of the etymology of the word can shed on the OT understanding of covenant... Considerably more significant for the biblical understanding of covenant is the way the term is used in the OT itself.”

- Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach To Biblical Theology*, 474-475.

# Covenants Assume an Unreliable Party

Covenants are grounded in oaths, and oaths presuppose a measure of unreliability in one or both of the actors involved in making the covenant. One wouldn't swear an oath to do something if both parties were completely reliable.

## Isaac's covenant with Abimelech in Genesis 26

But they said, “We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you. So we said, ‘Let there now be an oath between us, between you and us; and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, since we have not touched you, and since we have done nothing to you but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.’ ” – Genesis 26:28-29.

Paul Williamson declares that the oath “could well be described as the *sine qua non* of a covenant.” – *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, 39.

**Why would God make an oath with Himself? Or with us?**

# Getting the Definition Right

A “covenant” is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance. - George E. Mendenhall & Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” ABD, Volume 1 A – C , David Noel Freedman, Editor-in-Chief, 1179.

## My Definition:

“A biblical covenant between God and man is a solemnly sealed and explicit declaration of intent and obligation, about a matter of great importance. It binds one or both parties to fulfill the words of the covenant oath. The parties to the covenant cannot be changed out.

The function of a covenant is to amplify or reinforce the plain terms of the oath between the parties in order to clarify their relationship and clear away ambiguity or misinterpretation, thereby ensuring a unified understanding of the terms.”

# Considerations in Drafting Oaths

*Clarity*

*Premeditation*

*Expectation*

*Covenants are hermeneutically fixed.*

Covenants require premeditation for mutual interpretive comprehension leading to specific locked-in expectations.

“I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?” – Job 31:1.

# What GOD Says About Covenants (and Covenant Breakers)

For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath... - Hebrews 6:16-17.

Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. – Galatians 3:15.

I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it ... into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. – Jeremiah 34:18, 20.

Can he [the King of Judah] break a covenant and still be delivered? – Ezekiel 17:15.

# Divine Covenants, the Storyline of Scripture, and the Creation Project

“It is difficult to get past the lack of unambiguous textual warrant for the existence of a covenant between God and Adam. While the absence of covenant terminology cannot be said to exclude the idea..., the fact that such terminology is not introduced until Genesis 6:18, where it unarguably relates to God’s covenant with Noah, must carry considerable significance.”

– Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 58.

Before the Flood there were no recorded covenants. We must observe the ‘God’s actions – God’s words’ motif which proliferates in Genesis 1 – 8.

We (Christians) are moving together within the momentum of God’s covenants, particularly at this time the covenants with Noah, Abraham (the 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect), and the New covenant in Christ. When the Kingdom dawns and Creation welcomes its Maker and Redeemer the other covenants will join in; the first two parts of the Abrahamic and the Davidic, Priestly, and the “next installment” of the New covenant will add their voices to the consummation.

# The Creation Project Assumed by God's Covenants (Pts 1 – 4)

- “The Creation Project” builds on two hermeneutical principles: namely, the God’s actions = God’s words motif, and the oaths within the Divine covenants.
- Creation involves both a teleology and an eschatology. A study of the End Times involves a study of the Beginning Times (Eph. 1:7-10).
- Along with the introduction of sin and death into Creation, the Fall introduces the noetic effects of sin, which effectively resets our default from dependence upon God to independence from Him (Hence, the need for Faith, and for covenants).
- **The Noahic Covenant** provides a predictable framework for history until the consummation, and stresses the nature of Divine covenants as reinforcements of language (Gen. 8:22).

## The Creation Project Assumed by God's Covenants (Pts 5 - 7)

- The **Abrahamic Covenant** sets out a blessed future for separate lines of humanity: those from Isaac and Jacob (Israel) who inherit “the land of Canaan,” the Church, and “the Nations.” (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 15; Gal. 3:29; Rev. 21:9-10, 22-26)
- The “**Priestly**” covenant made with Phinehas (Num. 25:10-13), and his descendants the Zadokites (Ezek. 44:15) ensures that a future Temple involving priestly service of Yahweh will be present in Israel in the coming Kingdom.
- The **Davidic Covenant** promises Israel a great messianic King who will pull the strands of the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants together to cause peace and righteousness to abound upon Earth (Psa. 89; Isa. 11:1-10; Lk. 1:31-33)



## The Creation Project Assumed by God's Covenants (Pts 8 – 10)

- The **New Covenant** brings all the other everlasting covenants into itself in the Person of Christ, through whose redemptive death and new life the covenants must pass in order to find their specific fulfillments. (Jer. 33:14-26).
- The Church as a “new man” (Eph. 2:15) made up of Jew and Gentile is created after the resurrection of Christ and is wholly dependent upon it (Rom 6:1-11).
- The Second Coming of Christ, which is given more emphasis in the OT than the First Coming, brings the earth's Owner and the second Adam back as King to judge, restore and beautify Creation (Psa. 72:8; Dan. 7:13-14; Isa. 9:6b-7; Matt. 19:28)

## The Creation Project Assumed by God's Covenants (Pts 11 – 12)

- Because this world is cursed by God, even Christ cannot remove the ravages of the curse on the ground without constantly exercising His miraculous overmastery upon it.
- The whole Bible program is radically (but not artificially) Christological (Eph. 1:10; Rev. 22:12-13, 16).

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. – Revelation 21:3.