

Scott Hahn, "Covenant," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

COVENANT (בְּרִית, *berith*; διαθήκη, *diathēkē*). A sacred kinship bond between two parties, ratified by swearing an oath. Covenant making was a widespread custom throughout the ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman culture, serving as a means to forge sociopolitical bonds between individuals or groups. God's covenants are prominent in every period of salvation history. Divine covenants reveal the saving plan of God for establishing communion with Israel and the nations, ultimately fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Christ.

An inadequate rendering of "covenant" as "testament" may obscure the theological meaning of the division of salvation history—and the biblical canon—into the old and new covenants. Covenant language is more prominent in the Old Testament, which reflects its futuristic character as "a story in search of an ending." The language of divine kinship (e.g., "father," "son") emerges in the New Testament, because Christ's fulfillment of the Old Covenant forges familial bonds of divine communion with all humanity.

Covenant Defined

The proper definition of "covenant" is debated. Since the 19th century, German scholarship tends to define "covenant" in strictly legal terms, thereby reducing it to a synonym for "law" or "obligation." While covenants invariably contain laws, a growing number of scholars recognize the priority of covenant relations over legal obligations. The 20th century saw the emergence of a virtual consensus among Protestant (F.M. Cross, G.P. Hugenberger), Catholic (D.J. McCarthy, P. Kalluveetil) and Jewish (M. Weinfeld, D.N. Freedman) biblical scholars, who see that covenants in antiquity represent **sealing sacred kinship bonds between two parties by means of both legal sanction and liturgical rite.** As Harvard professor F.M. Cross explains, covenant "is ... a widespread legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group, including aliens." Covenants are sealed by oath-swearing, and the resultant familial bonds are ratified with the celebration of cultic rites and the regulation of legal conditions and obligations.

Covenant and Contract Distinguished

Contracts and covenants differ in a few areas. In terms of initiation, contracts are made by the **exchange of promises**, whereas covenants are sworn by **solemn oaths**. In application, contracts are limited by the terms of the exchange of property ("this is yours, that is mine"), while covenants involve an exchange of life ("I am yours, you are mine"), which covers a virtually unlimited range of human relations and duties. In terms of motivation, contracts are based on profit and self-interest, while covenants call for self-giving loyalty and sacrificial love. Contracts are temporary while covenant bonds are permanent, even intergenerational. Such distinctions do not imply that covenants are necessarily opposed to contracts, since covenants call for both promise-making and oath-swearing (Heb 6:13–18). A contract is an arrangement in human affairs that may be reinforced by swearing a covenant, in order to add the more binding dimension of the divine.

Covenant and Oath: Blessing and Curse

Scripture and ancient Near Eastern texts present varied ways for solemnizing covenants. In most cases, the act of making a covenant involves oath-swearing by one or both of the parties (Gen 21:31–32; 22:16; 26:28; Josh 9:15; Ezek 16:59, 17:13–19). By invoking the divine name, **the swearer calls upon God (or the gods) to enforce the covenant**, with either a blessing for obedience or a curse for rebellion.

A covenant oath is solemnly sworn and then **ritually enacted**. Ancient Near Eastern texts offer many examples of such sworn oath rituals, like the one presented in an Assyrian text (754 BC): “This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu [the covenant-maker]. If Mati’ilu sins against this covenant, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off ... the head of Mati’ilu be torn off” (*ANET*, 532). Similar covenant oath rituals of self-malediction are attested in scripture (Gen 15:7–21), where Abram cuts the animals in half for the Lord to pass between the pieces (see Jer 34:18). Other kinds of self-maledictory rituals are also found in scripture, such as animal sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood (Exod 24:8; Psa 50:5), which seem to convey a similar message: “May our blood be shed as the blood of these victims.” G.P. Hugenberger, M.G. Kline and others argue that the symbolic meaning of circumcision is probably self-maledictory (Gen 17:10; i.e. “whoever violates this covenant will—like this foreskin—be cut off”). Traces of covenant oath swearing and conditional self-malediction also appear in New Covenant ritual acts: baptism and the Eucharist (Mark 10:38; 1 Cor 11:27–32). Indeed, the description of baptism as “an appeal to God for a clear conscience” (1 Pet 3:21) implies that baptism was understood very early in terms of a covenant oath.

Alternatively, a number of biblical texts offer examples of covenant oath rituals that signify the opposite of malediction (i.e., benediction), which reflect the positive aspect of sharing sacred kinship bonds. For instance, the covenant-making parties may share a common meal to confirm their new familial fellowship (Gen 26:30; 31:54; Exod 24:11; Josh 9:14–15; Luke 22:14–23). Likewise, the common use of kinship terms (“brother,” 1 Kgs 20:32–34; “father and son,” Pss 2:7; 89:26–28; 2 Sam 7:14; Luke 22:29), and the exchange of gifts or clothing (Gen 21:27; 1 Sam 18:3) also express familial solidarity. The new covenant is ratified at the Last Supper (Luke 22:20) with the institution of the Eucharist, when the disciples share a sacrificial meal with Jesus like the one Moses and the elders of Israel shared with God at Sinai (Exod 24:11). Indeed, Jesus’ solemn declaration, “This is **my blood of the covenant**” (Matt 26:28), echoes the words of Moses while sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial **animals to ratify the covenant at Mount Sinai** (Exod 24:8). Thus, the Eucharist is the sacrifice and family meal of the new covenant (Luke 22:14–29; 1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:23–25).

Covenant and Family: Relations, Obligations, Consecrations

Three distinctive and interrelated dimensions of covenants in Scripture and the ancient Near East can be identified: relations, obligations, and consecrations. Covenants are familial bonds that are legally sanctioned and liturgically ritualized. All three aspects appear in the covenant ceremony at Sinai (Exod 24:3–11). The familial bond is illustrated by the shared meal (24:9–11); the legal sanctions are reflected in Israel’s sworn oath (24:7–8); the liturgical ritual is enacted at the altar of sacrifice (24:4–5). Thus, covenants give rise to familial relations and their attendant legal obligations, which are divinely consecrated in ritual.

Covenant Types: Kinship, Treaty, Grant

Covenants may be classified according to which party swears the oath that ratifies the covenant. When both parties swear, a “kinship” (or “parity”) covenant results. This type of covenant is classified as “kinship” on account of the mutual pledge sworn by both parties rather than a unilateral obligation sworn by one party to another. In a kinship covenant, both parties jointly pledge themselves to each other, resulting in a bond with reciprocal responsibilities. Scripture offers many examples of kinship covenants (Gen 26:30; 31:54; Exod 24:11), which typically include a family meal in the covenant ritual.

When a subordinate party alone swears the covenant oath, the result is a “vassal” covenant. In such a situation, the superior party imposes a unilaterally sworn covenant oath upon the inferior, frequently with a ritual of self-malediction. Ancient Near Eastern examples of this covenant include the famous Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (king of Assyria, 681–669 BC), who imposed covenant loyalty oaths on rebellious vassals to guarantee their acceptance of his heir, Ashurbanipal. Biblical examples of the vassal covenant include the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17), where Abraham alone performs the ritual, along with the Deuteronomic covenant, where Israel alone swears an oath of self-malediction (Deut 27:11–26; Josh 8:30–35).

When the superior party alone swears the oath, a “grant” covenant results. Various grant covenants are found in ancient Near Eastern sources, in which suzerains reward the loyal service of vassals by swearing a covenant oath, granting them royal lands (or offices) in perpetuity. In such a covenant, the superior party unilaterally binds himself to bless the inferior for heroic deeds of loyal service. Biblical examples include God’s sworn covenant oath with Abraham and Isaac on the occasion of the Aqedah (Gen 22:15–18; Luke 1:72–73; Heb 6–7), and with David and Solomon (Pss 89:3–37; 110:4; 132:1–11)

Secular Covenants in the Ancient Near East and Sacred Scripture

The majority of covenants in Scripture and the ancient Near East are called “secular”—these are made between human parties, apart from divine interventions.

Ancient Near Eastern archaeology has uncovered many such “secular” covenant texts. Two of the larger collections are the Hittite Covenant Treaties and the previously mentioned Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon. The Hittite Treaties date from the second millennium BC, and involve covenants made by the King of Hatti (modern Turkey) with rulers of surrounding people groups. The **treaty** texts of these covenants followed a formal pattern, nearly identical to the structure of Deuteronomy:

- I. Title and Preamble (compare Deut 1:1–5)
- II. Historical Prologue (Deut 1–3)
- III. General Stipulations (Deut 5)
- IV. Specific Stipulations (Deut 6–11; 12–26)
- V. Dual Sanctions: Blessings and Curses (Deut 27–28)
- VI. Instructions for the Storage and Reading of the Covenant Document (Deut 31:9–13)
- VII. Invocation of Witnesses (Deut 31:14–29)

Many form-critical scholars note the remarkable parallels between Deuteronomy and the Hittite treaties (M.G. Kline; K. Kitchen; J. Berman), and argue for an earlier dating of Deuteronomy (second millennium BC). Neo-Assyrian treaties from the first millennium BC

diverge sharply from this formal pattern. The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (eighth century BC), for example, omit several elements, most notably the Historical Prologue and the Blessings.

A number of secular covenants between two human parties are recorded in the Bible: between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22–33), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26–33), Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:43–54), the Israelites and Gibeonites (Josh 9:15), David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1–4; 20:8), Ahab and Ben-Hadad (1 Kgs 20:32–34), Jehoiada and the palace guards (2 Kgs 11:4) and others. These “secular” covenants testify to the widespread use of covenants to extend sacred kinship bonds in ancient society. Even these secular covenants forged bonds of sacred kinship that could not be broken without triggering curses, even when covenants were established under false pretense or duress (Josh 9:19; Ezek 17:11–21).

Divine Covenants in the Economy of Salvation History

Israel is unique among ancient Near Eastern peoples in their belief that God entered a covenant with them. While non-Israelites formed covenants with other peoples by invoking the names of their gods, only the God of Israel initiates a covenant and binds himself by oath to his people (Gen 22:16–18; Heb 6:13–19) and Israel responds by swearing a covenant by which they bound themselves to him (Exod 24:3–11). Even after violating that oath with the worship of the golden calf (Exod 32), Moses discovers how God’s “sworn mercies” take precedent over covenant curses (Exod 32:13), and so Israel’s covenant is renewed according to God’s “grace and mercy” (Exod 33:19).

A pattern of divine covenants characterizes the whole economy of salvation history, starting with creation. The climax is the sanctification of the Sabbath—the “sign of the covenant” with creation and Israel (Gen 2:1–4; Exod 31:16–17). God’s “fatherly plan” for his family advances at every stage of salvation history through a series of divine covenants with chosen mediators: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and ultimately Jesus Christ. This sequence of divine covenants may be interpreted in theological terms, as God accommodates himself to the developmental stages of the human family: marriage, household, tribe, nation, international kingdom, and ultimately the universal church of the new covenant.

Divine Covenants in Genesis (Adam, Noah, Abraham)

The first stage of the divine covenant plan is revealed in the marital covenant between Adam and Eve. Even after they violate that covenant, God’s justice is mitigated by His sworn mercies. God renews a domestic covenant with Noah and his household (Gen 6:18). God renews a tribal covenant with Abram, who is called to serve as a channel of God’s fatherly blessing to all nations (Gen 12:2–3).

This Abrahamic covenant advances in three distinct divine covenant-making episodes.

God first makes a (kinship) covenant with *Abram* (Gen 15:1–21), which is then renewed—with *Abraham*—through the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17:1–27). Finally, God rewards his servant’s loyal obedience at the Aqedah by swearing to renew the covenant with Abraham’s seed (Gen 22:15–18). These covenants are cumulative. Genesis 15 describes the initial covenant with Abram, where God upgrades His earlier promise to make of him a great nation (Gen 12:2a) into a covenant oath (Gen 15:16–21). The circumcision covenant (Gen 17) upgrades the second promise of “a great name” (Gen 12:2b) into a covenant of “kinship” over many nations (Gen 17:6). Genesis 22 describes how God swears a covenant oath to the seed of Abraham (22:15–

18), following the Aqedah, to confirm the third promise (Gen 12:3)—to make him the source of God’s fatherly blessing for “all nations” (Gen 12:3). The subsequent divine covenants in salvation history are grounded in the Abrahamic covenant.

The Mosaic Covenant

In the exodus, when the Lord delivers Israel from Egyptian slavery (see Gen 15:13–14), He renews the covenant with Moses at Sinai. This reconstitutes the 12 tribes into a “kingdom of priests”—a national family of God (Exod 19–24). Israel’s subsequent worship of the calf (Exod 32) necessitates a renewal, and reconfiguration of the covenant (Exod 34:1–35), where the general priesthood of the firstborns of Israel is transferred to the Levites (Exod 32:27–29; Num 3:5–51). The Levitical covenant brings about a number of legal changes and additions (Exod 35–Lev 27). After forty years of continuous rebellions in the desert (Num 11; 12; 14; 16; 17), culminating with the idolatry and harlotry of the second generation at Beth-Peor (Num 25), the covenant undergoes a second major renewal and reconfiguration with the Deuteronomic (vassal) covenant on the Plains of Moab (Deut 1:5; 3:29; 4:44–46). The Deuteronomic covenant is distinguished from the initial covenant at Sinai (also called “Horeb,” see Deut 29:1). In addition to a theophany, Moses now becomes Israel’s lawgiver, and gives them many statutes unique to Deuteronomy, including permission for monarchy (17:14–20), total warfare (20:16–18), usury (23:20), divorce, and remarriage (Deut 24:1–4). Jesus will teach that some of these Deuteronomic statutes were not the divine ideal, but concessions to Israel’s “hardness of heart” (Matt 19:8–9).

The Davidic Covenant

Under the Davidic covenant, the Lord elevates the nation of Israel to an international kingdom. This covenant is announced in Nathan’s prophetic oracle (2 Sam 7:5–16), although the word “covenant” only appears in other texts (2 Sam 23:5; Pss 89:19–37; 132:1–18; Isa 55:3; 2 Chr 13:5; 21:7; Jer 33:20–22). Distinctive aspects of the Davidic covenant include an everlasting throne (2 Sam 7:13–16), the gift of divine sonship for anointed heirs (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:6–9; 89:26–27), and the centrality of Zion and the Jerusalem temple, to which pilgrims come from all Israel and the nations (1 Kgs 8:41–43; Isa 2:1–4; 56:6–7).

After a brief period of Solomonic glory, when the features of the Davidic covenant seemed to be partially fulfilled (1 Kgs 4–10), the kingdom entered a long period of division and decline (1 Kgs 12). After this, the prophets announced a new covenant (Jer 31:31; compare Isa 55:1–3; 59:20–21; 61:8–9; Ezek 34:25; 37:26). This new covenant is set in sharp contrast to the broken Mosaic covenant (Jer 31:32; compare Ezek 20:23–28; Isa 61:3–4), but in continuity with the Davidic covenant, which it would restore in a transformative manner (Jer 33:14–26; Isa 9; 11; 55:3; Ezek 37:15–28).

The New Covenant

The Gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, clearly depict Jesus as the Son (heir) of David and thus the one to restore the Davidic kingdom covenant (Matt 1:1–25; Luke 1:31–33, 69; 2:4). At the Last Supper, Jesus explicitly identifies His body and blood as the new covenant promised by the Prophets (Jer 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), fulfilling the oracle of Isaiah regarding the Servant of the Lord, who would not simply make a covenant but would become one (Isa 42:6; 49:8).

John's Gospel presents Jesus performing seven "signs" in connection with seven temple feasts (2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 9:14; 10:22; 11:55), in order to show how the risen Jesus is the new temple (John 2:19–20). Jesus also declares the "new commandment" to be precisely that life-giving "love" that he embodies—and imparts—to all believers (John 13:34; 15:12; 17:23–26). Seventeen of the 33 occurrences of "covenant" in the New Testament are found in Hebrews. The author of Hebrews argues for the superiority of the new covenant over the old (i.e. broken Mosaic) covenant, based on the "better" promises, mediator, sacrifice, high priesthood, oath, sanctuary etc. (Heb 1–9). All of this is the result of the royal high priestly work of Christ as God's firstborn Son (Heb 1:6).

While the new covenant surpasses the Mosaic, it does so by restoring and transforming the Davidic, for Jesus is also the Son of David who rules eternally from the heavenly Zion (Heb 12:22–24). Similar echoes are heard throughout the New Testament, where Jesus manifests His rule over Israel and all nations (Matt 28:18–20). He does this through His 12 royal ministers (Luke 22:32; Matt 19:28; compare 1 Kgs 4:7), and His royal steward, Peter (Matt 16:18–19; compare Isa 22:15–22). James sees the church's growth among Jews and Gentiles as a fulfillment of Amos' promise that God would restore the fallen "tent" (i.e. kingdom) of David (Acts 15:13–18; compare Amos 9:11–12). The Apocalypse points to the consummation of salvation history with the "unveiling" of the bridal church as the "new Jerusalem" (Rev 21–22).

The new covenant also fulfills the other covenants of salvation history. Jesus is a new Adam (Rom 5:12–19) who makes us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). He fulfills the sworn promises of the Abrahamic covenant (Luke 1:72–73; Rom 4; Gal 3–4). Christ also fulfills the Mosaic covenant with his new Passover and new exodus (Luke 9:31; 22:14–20). For Paul, it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the divine law, which was given to Israel in the Mosaic covenant, is fulfilled in the new covenant (Rom 8:3–4; 10:4; 13:8–10). The notion of covenant reaches its zenith in Christ, who fulfills the divine covenants not only in who He is, as the eternal Son of the Father, but by what He accomplishes in causing us to share in the grace of His own divine sonship (1 John 3:1–2). The new covenant of Christ ends up fulfilling the old covenant in a way that surpasses the greatest hopes of ancient Israelites, even as it will exceed our own expectations (1 Cor 2:9).

English Translation of the Terms for Covenant

The Hebrew word for "covenant" in the Old Testament is *berith*, which the Septuagint consistently renders with the Greek word *diatheke*. There is little doubt that the New Testament authors followed the practice of the Septuagint and employed the term *diatheke* to mean *berith*, "covenant." However, because many classical Hellenistic sources also used *diatheke* to refer to a "last will" or "testament," some older English translations (KJV) render *diatheke* as "testament" in certain passages. More recent translations correct this error, except in a couple of instances. For example, Heb 9:15–17 (RSV) reads as follows:

"Therefore he [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant [*diatheke*], so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant [*diatheke*]. For where a will [*diatheke*] is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will [*diatheke*] takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive."

The word *diatheke* is translated as “covenant” in Heb 9:15 but as “will” in the following verses. Some see the author switching to the classical meaning of *diatheke* in these latter verses, where the discussion seems to revolve around executing a will at a person’s death. However, the author of Hebrews may also refer to “covenant” in 16–17. Indeed, the covenant under consideration is the broken covenant at Sinai. The Greek of these verses may be translated as follows:

“For where a [broken] covenant is involved, it is necessary for the death of the covenant-maker to be borne. For a [broken] covenant is enforced upon dead bodies, since it certainly is not in force while the covenant-maker still lives.”

The author of Hebrews is emphasizing that the (broken) Sinai covenant required the death of the Israelites (Exod 32:9–10) because of the curse of death they put themselves under by swearing the covenant oath at Sinai (Exod 24:8). Due to God’s previously “sworn mercies” to Abraham, the curse of death was not executed at the time (Exod 32:14). But that is precisely what Christ endures, as He dies on behalf of Israel (Heb 9:15).

A similar translation problem occurs in Gal 3:15: “To give a human example, brethren: no one annuls even a man’s will [*diatheke*], or adds to it, once it has been ratified” (RSV).

In the context (Gal 3:15–18), Paul is discussing the fixed nature of oath-sworn covenants. Since even a human covenant cannot be changed after it has been solemnly sworn (Gal 3:15; compare Josh 9:18–20), God’s sworn covenant certainly cannot be (Gal 3:17). God cannot change His covenant with Abraham (Gen 22:15–18) to bless all nations through his seed (Gen 22:18, compare Gal 3:14) by adding the Mosaic law as a condition four hundred years later (Gal 3:17–18). To Paul, if it is unjust for humans to attempt to add new conditions, or alter a covenant after it has been sworn, it is no less so for God.

All occurrences of *diatheke* in the New Testament may and should be translated “covenant,” following the consistent example of the Septuagint.

Selected Resources for Further Study

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