

THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

1. An Overview

- Definitions
 - Elements in a biblical covenant
 - An elected, rather than natural relationship
 - Between two parties
 - That involves obligations
 - Formalized by oaths
 - With penalties for a failure to fulfill the obligations
 - And ratified by a visual ritual.
 - Definitions:
 - “A relationship involving an oath-bound commitment.” (Wellum & Gentry, p.132)
 - “A covenant, in its normal sense, is an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligations under oath.” (Hugenberger, quoted in Wellum and Gentry, p. 132)
 - “The solemn ratification of an existing elective relationship involving promises or obligations that are sealed with an oath.” (Williamson, p. 43)
- Covenant treaties in the Ancient Near East
 - Suzerain/ vassal treaty
 - Title/ preamble – names of the parties
 - Historical prologue – brief history of the relationships between the two countries
 - Stipulations, both general and detailed
 - Deposit and public reading of the text
 - List of witnesses
 - Curses/ blessings for breaking/ keeping the treaty
 - Royal charter/ land grant treaty
 - A grant of property or position given by a king to a servant
 - The emphasis is on the responsibility of the king to fulfill his promises to his servant, while the Suzerain treaty places the obligations primarily on the vassal to remain loyal.
 - The suzerain treaty is based on interstate relationships, while the royal charter treaty is based on *interpersonal* relationships.
- Divine/ human biblical covenants
 1. Covenant with creation (Genesis 1-3)
 2. Covenant with Noah (Genesis 6-9)
 3. Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12/ 15/ 17)
 4. Covenant with Israel (Exodus 19/ 20-24)
 5. Covenant with David (2 Samuel 7/ Psalm 89)
 6. The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31-34/ Ezekiel 33-39)

- Covenants provide the structure of the Bible's "big story".
 - Their existence speaks to a basic unified message of the Bible.
 - The original creation covenant sets the Creator's expectation for the relationship between humans and the created order, especially creating a human dynasty that has dominion over the earth.
 - The Noahic covenant promises a cosmic stability.
 - The Abrahamic covenant takes the story forward centered on an elect people and a land.
 - The Mosaic covenant details the promises and curses for that people's obedience or disobedience with a focus on their possession of the land.
 - The Davidic covenant promises a new dynasty.
 - The new covenant answers the need for a newly constituted people of God who will one day have universal dominion as a royal people.

"If we could delete all references to covenant – which we cannot do, precisely because it is regularly integral to its contexts – we would have an anthology of stories. As it is we have a structure that can house a plot." – Richard Elliot Friedman, quoted in Wellum/ Gentry, p. 139.

- They also carry divine revelation forward in an ever-clearer and progressive manner.
 - The central theme of the Bible after humanity's fall is *the redemptive plan of God*. How will the Lord save his people from his own justice?
 - That plan is unveiled progressively from Genesis 3:15 onward.
 - With each successive covenant, the plan becomes clearer as we move forward in the biblical story line, until the focus settles on Christ and his redemptive work. He becomes the beneficiary of the covenant promises and the recipient of the covenant curses.