

# An Overview of the Biblical Covenants

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## Introduction

### I. Recap of Hebrews Study

- A. Historical Context: Jewish professing Christians are considering abandoning Christianity and returning to Judaism in order to avoid persecution.
- B. Main Point: The author writes to these believers in order to demonstrate the inability of the Mosaic Covenant to save and sanctify man. It has been entirely fulfilled and superseded in Christ, who is now the Mediator of a better covenant, enacted on better promises: the New Covenant.

- 1. Jesus is superior to the angels (1:4–2:18) as the Great Messenger sent from God.
- 2. Jesus is superior to Moses (3:1–6), as the Great Prophet of God and Redeemer of His people.
- 3. Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood (7:1–9:22), as our Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens and has made atonement once for all on behalf of His people.
- 4. Jesus is Himself a superior sacrifice than the sacrifices offered under the Mosaic economy (9:23–10:18)

### C. Relevance for Believers Today

- 1. Jesus is absolutely and supremely worthy of all our worship, adoration, and trust.
- 2. Jesus is the *only* perfectly sufficient sacrifice by which sins may be atoned for, by which righteousness may be provided, and by which man's fellowship with God may be restored.
- 3. While we may not be tempted to revert back to a bloody sacrificial system, we may well be tempted to revert to our own good works (spiritual performance) to earn our acceptance with God. Hebrews exhorts us not to do this.

4. Suffering for Christ's sake is a means of sweet fellowship with Him (Heb 13:12–13), and in patient endurance there is unspeakable reward (Heb 13:14; cf. 10:35–39).

## II. Introduction to the Biblical Covenants

Irv Busenitz: "Let no one underestimate the importance and significance of a correct understanding of the divine covenants. It is much more than an intellectual pursuit. They provide a most foundational theological anchor for understanding God's working in human history."<sup>1</sup>

### A. Human History as God's Kingdom Program

#### 1. Man's Creation Mandate (Gen 1:26–28)

Man is commissioned to rule God's creation in righteousness as His vice-regents on the earth

#### 2. Man's Fall (Gen 3:1–7)

Man falls into sin and thus fails to steward God's Kingdom as commissioned

#### 3. The Promise of Restoration through the Seed (Gen 3:15)

- a. Salvation from the curse of sin
- b. Restoration to fellowship with God
- c. Restoration of the image of God
- d. Restoration of man as vice-regents of the Kingdom of God

#### 4. God's Kingdom Being Restored (Gen 4:1–Rev 20:15)

### B. The Covenants as the Means of Progressing God's Kingdom Program

As redemptive history unfolds, the biblical covenants act somewhat as checkpoints that develop the overarching story of the progress of God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, "Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant," *The Masters Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 182.

Bill Barrick: “God [gives] the biblical covenants in order to identify His people and to identify the progressive development of His kingdom program.”<sup>2</sup>

### C. Helps for Interpreting the Covenants

#### 1. Conditional vs. Unconditional

Unconditional covenants sometimes contain conditional elements by which the blessings associated with the covenant were experienced temporally.

For example, the Davidic Covenant unconditionally promised that David would not lack a son to sit on the throne of Israel forever (cf. Ps 89:30–37). However, if the kings of Israel refused to walk in Yahweh’s ways, Israel might temporarily lack a man to sit on the throne (1 Kings 2:3–4). Such was the case during the Babylonian exile, and that is the case at the present moment. Yet, failure to meet these conditional elements does not nullify the unconditional promise of the everlasting reign of the Davidic King.

#### 2. Initial, Partial Fulfillment

What the Old Testament saw as a single coming of Messiah is to be fulfilled in two comings. Because of this, many of the covenants have been initially and partially fulfilled at Christ’s first coming, only to be completely fulfilled at His second coming.

For example, the church already takes part in the fulfillment of the New Covenant promises such as regeneration, the Spirit’s permanent indwelling, and forgiveness of sins. Yet the church does not take part in the physical blessings of a land and material prosperity. That is to say, only *part* of the New Covenant blessings are being fulfilled. At the second coming, Israel will partake of *all* of the New Covenant blessings promised to them. Thus, while the New Covenant has been initially and partially fulfilled in the church, its complete fulfillment awaits Israel’s salvation at Jesus’ return.

#### 3. Fulfillment *in* Christ vs. Fulfillment *because* of Christ

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<sup>2</sup> William D. Barrick, “Biblical Covenants and Dispensational Theology,” 6.

While all the promises of God are “Yes” in Christ (2 Cor 1:20), not every covenant and promise must be absorbed *into* Christ as a fulfillment.

For example, the priestly covenant promises that Phinehas’ line will compose a perpetual priesthood. This covenant is fulfilled in the millennial kingdom, where the Zadokites (descendants of Phinehas, cf. 1 Chr 6:50–53) minister before Lord in the millennial temple (Ezek 44:10–16). Christ does not become a Levitical/Zadokian priest; He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Nevertheless, while Christ is not Himself the fulfillment of the promise made to Phinehas, the priestly covenant is fulfilled *because* of Christ. This fulfillment could only come during the millennial reign of the Davidic King (cf. Jer 33:18–22), and that millennial reign is impossible apart from Christ and His New Covenant ministry. Therefore, since it is His coming and kingdom that make this possible, we say that the priestly covenant is fulfilled *because* of Christ.

Note: The following notes are intended to be supplemental to the information contained in the handout, which provides an overview of each covenant. Please refer to that document along with this one.

## **The Noahic Covenant**

### **I. Key Scriptures**

Genesis 6:18–19

Genesis 8:20–22

Genesis 9:1–17

### **II. Summary**

“The Noahic Covenant . . . promised that God would never again destroy the world by flood. He sealed His promise with the continuing sign of a rainbow.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 189.

“In the Noahic Covenant, God showed His gracious mercy toward all mankind, both redeemed and unredeemed, causing it to rain on the just and the unjust and assuring the ongoing, uninterrupted cycle of seasons. In it, He demonstrated His unwillingness to allow the sinfulness of man to derail His plan set forth in Genesis 3:15, His unwillingness to allow the sinfulness of man to abrogate the pre-fall command to ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,’ a command reiterated after the flood to Noah.”<sup>4</sup>

### III. Key verses in Hebrews

11:7 – By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

## The Abrahamic Covenant

### I. Key Scriptures

Genesis 12:1–3

Genesis 13:14–17

Genesis 15:1–21

Genesis 17:2–14

Genesis 22:14–19

### II. Summary

“In the Abrahamic Covenant, God demonstrated His unmerited favor and unilateral choice of Israel as ‘the apple of His eye,’ a special people called out from among the nations through whom the Messiah would come.”<sup>5</sup>

### III. Key verses in Hebrews

6:13–20 – For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, <sup>14</sup>saying, “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.” <sup>15</sup>And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. <sup>16</sup>For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

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<sup>4</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 182.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, <sup>18</sup>so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup>This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, <sup>20</sup>where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

11:17–19 – By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; <sup>18</sup>it was he to whom it was said, “In Isaac your descendants shall be called.” <sup>19</sup>He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

## **The Mosaic Covenant**

### **I. Key Scriptures**

One should give attention to the entirety of Exodus chapters 19 through 24. Some key verses from that section include:

Exodus 19:5–6

Exodus 20:1–17 – The Ten Commandments

Exodus 24:3–8

The entire book of Leviticus outlines the Israel’s ceremonial worship of Yahweh according to the Mosaic Covenant.

- 1–7 – Instructions for the various kinds of sacrifices (e.g., burnt offerings, grain offerings, etc.)
- 8–10 – Instructions for the consecration of priests
- 16–17 – Instructions for the Day of Atonement
- 21–23 – Instructions for priestly duties
- Other laws governing various aspects of life under the Mosaic Covenant

### **II. Summary**

“In the Mosaic Covenant, God revealed His holiness and the heinousness of sin. The daily sacrifices provided a constant reminder of the need for the shedding of blood for the remission of sin, for the propitiating of God’s wrath.”<sup>6</sup>

### III. Key verses in Hebrews

A main theme of the Book of Hebrews is to contrast the inferior Mosaic Covenant with the superior New Covenant. As a result, the overwhelming majority of the book deals with the Mosaic Covenant. References to Moses, the Levitical priesthood, the sacrificial system would all be included here. 7:1–10:18 is a particularly important section.

7:18–19 – For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness <sup>19</sup>(for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

8:7 – For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.

8:13 – When He said, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

9:18–21 – Therefore even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood. <sup>19</sup>For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, <sup>20</sup>saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.” <sup>21</sup>And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood.

10:1–4 – For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. <sup>2</sup>Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? <sup>3</sup>But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. <sup>4</sup>For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

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<sup>6</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 182.

## **The Priestly Covenant**

### **I. Key Scriptures**

Num 25:10–13

Malachi 2:4–7

### **II. Summary**

“The Priestly Covenant promised a perpetual priesthood to the descendants of Levi because of the righteous act of Phinehas in freeing Israel from the consequences of God’s wrath. That priesthood will continue throughout the future millennial kingdom under the rule of David’s descendant.”<sup>7</sup>

Note: God’s covenant with the priests of Phinehas’ line has little to do with the Levitical priesthood that is fulfilled in Christ’s first advent. The Levitical priesthood which Christ fulfilled (which Hebrews speaks about everywhere) is tied to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Heb 7:11–12), not the priestly covenant.

### **III. Key verses in Hebrews**

None

## **The Davidic Covenant**

### **I. Key Scriptures**

2 Sam 7:9–16

1 Chr 17:7–14

Ps 89:19–37

### **II. Summary**

“In the Davidic Covenant, God promised the perpetual reign of the descendants of David, ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah and His millennial reign.”<sup>8</sup>

### **III. Key verses in Hebrews**

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<sup>7</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 189.

<sup>8</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 182.



1:8 – But of the Son He says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom.”

1:13 & 10:12–13 – But to which of the angels has He ever said, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet”? . . . <sup>10:13</sup>But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, “sat down at the right hand of God,” <sup>13</sup>waiting from that time onward “until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet” (cf. Psalm 110:1).

## The New Covenant

### I. Key Scriptures

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Ezekiel 36:24–30

### II. Summary

“In the New Covenant, God evidenced anew His continual pouring out of grace, a promise through which He would put His law within His people, writing it on their hearts.”<sup>9</sup>

### III. Key verses in Hebrews

A main theme of the Book of Hebrews is to contrast the inferior Mosaic Covenant with the superior New Covenant. As a result, the overwhelming majority of the book deals with the New Covenant. References to a better covenant, a greater priestly ministry, and a better sacrifice would all be included here. 8:1–10:18 is a particularly important section.

Hebrews 8:6–13 – But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. <sup>7</sup>For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. <sup>8</sup>For finding fault with them, He says, “Behold, days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . .” <sup>13</sup>When He said, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

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<sup>9</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 182.

Hebrews 9:15 – For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Hebrews 10:14–18 – For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. <sup>15</sup>And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, <sup>16</sup>“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, and on their mind I will write them,” He then says, <sup>17</sup>“And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” <sup>18</sup>Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Hebrews 12:22–24 – But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, <sup>23</sup>to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup>and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

### For Further Study

- See The Master’s Seminary Journal, Vol. 10 No. 2, Fall 1999, pp. 182–280.
- Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 35–78.
- John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Christ’s Prophetic Plans*, pp. 71–73.
- Richard Mayhue and Thomas Ice, “Covenants,” in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (2004), pp. 60–65.
- Renald Showers, *There Really Is A Difference* (1990).